

The *Master* of Ragnarok & Blesser of *Einherjar*

BY SEIICHI TAKAYAMA
ILLUSTRATION: YUKISAN

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"L-Linnea?! Wh-Why...?!"

Linnea felt her whole body growing feverishly hot. Despite being a woman, she'd worked her way up to be second-in-command of the Steel Clan. She was responsible for the administration of one of the most powerful nations in the realm. That said, she was still a young lady... revealing her unclothed body to the man she loved was embarrassing.



Fagrahvél, patriarch of the Sword
Clan, made his declaration.

***"...As you command,
Your Majesty. I will
destroy the Steel
Clan, without fail!"***



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Characters



Felicia

Yuuto's adjutant, and sworn younger sister. She is an Einherjar with the all-purpose rune Skirnir, the Expressionless Servant.



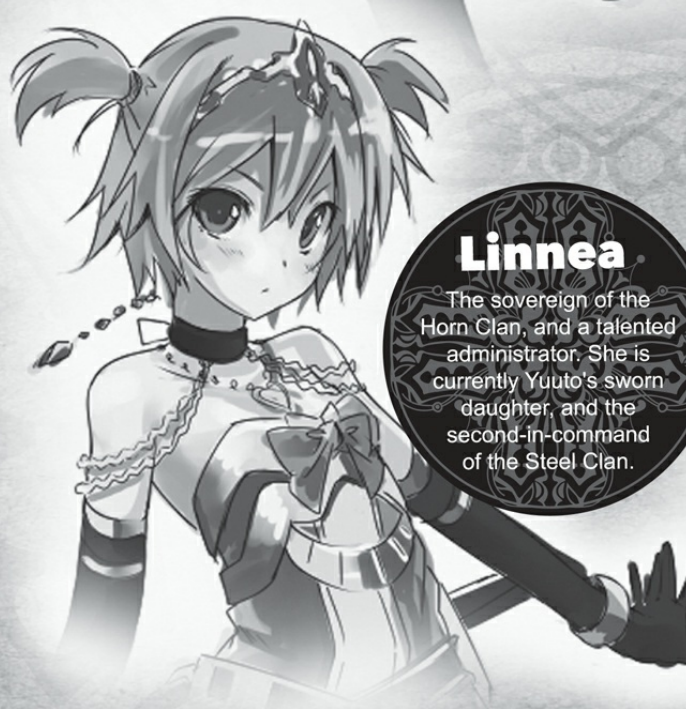
Sigrún

Yuuto's sworn daughter, a soldier and Einherjar of the rune Hati, Devourer of the Moon. She holds the title of Máragarmr, given only to the Wolf Clan's strongest warrior.



Yuuto Suoh

A young man summoned to the world of Yggdrasil from the modern era. As the sovereign of his newly-created Steel Clan, he now rules over multiple subordinate clans as the reginarch, or "Great Lord."



Linnea

The sovereign of the Horn Clan, and a talented administrator. She is currently Yuuto's sworn daughter, and the second-in-command of the Steel Clan.



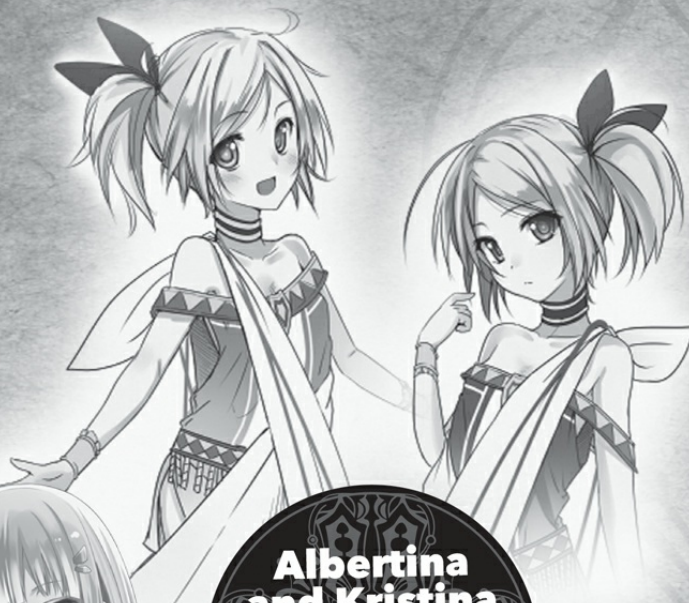
Ingrid

Yuuto's sworn daughter, and chief blacksmith of the workshop which produces weapons and other items for the Wolf Clan. She is an Einherjar with the rune Ívaldi, Birther of Blades.



Mitsuki Shimoya

Yuuto's childhood friend and beloved. She made up her mind that she would live together with Yuuto, and thanks to Felicia's summoning ritual, she is now a resident of Yggdrasil.



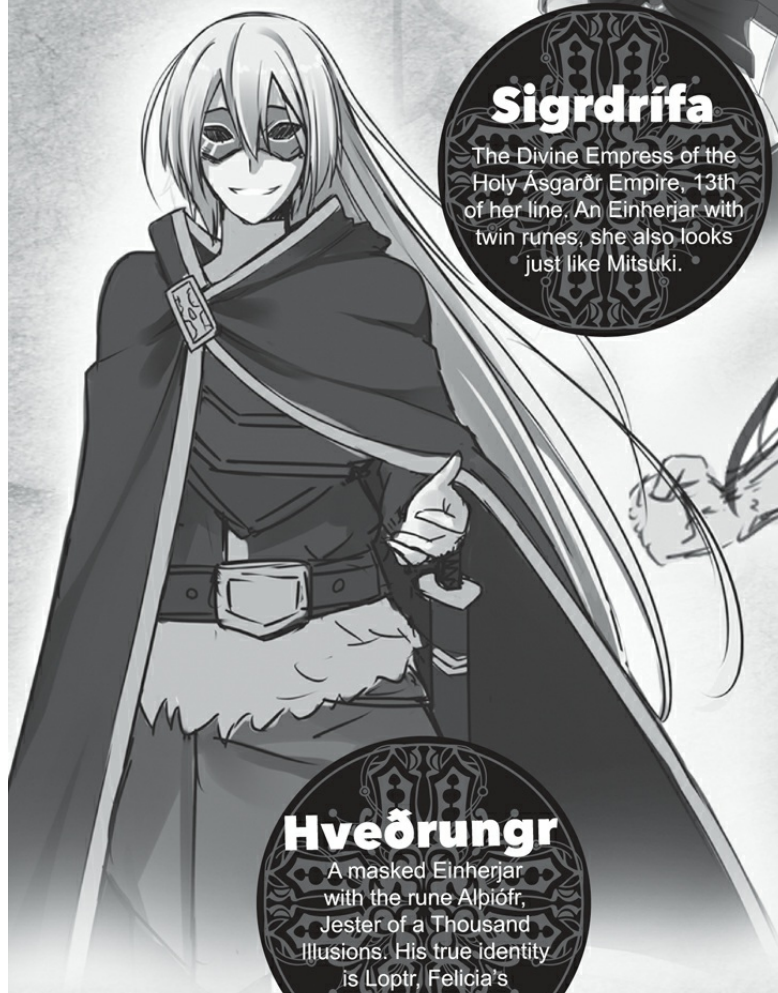
Albertina and Kristina

Twin daughters of the Claw Clan patriarch, Kris and Al for short. Teasing her flighty sister Albertina is what Kristina lives for.



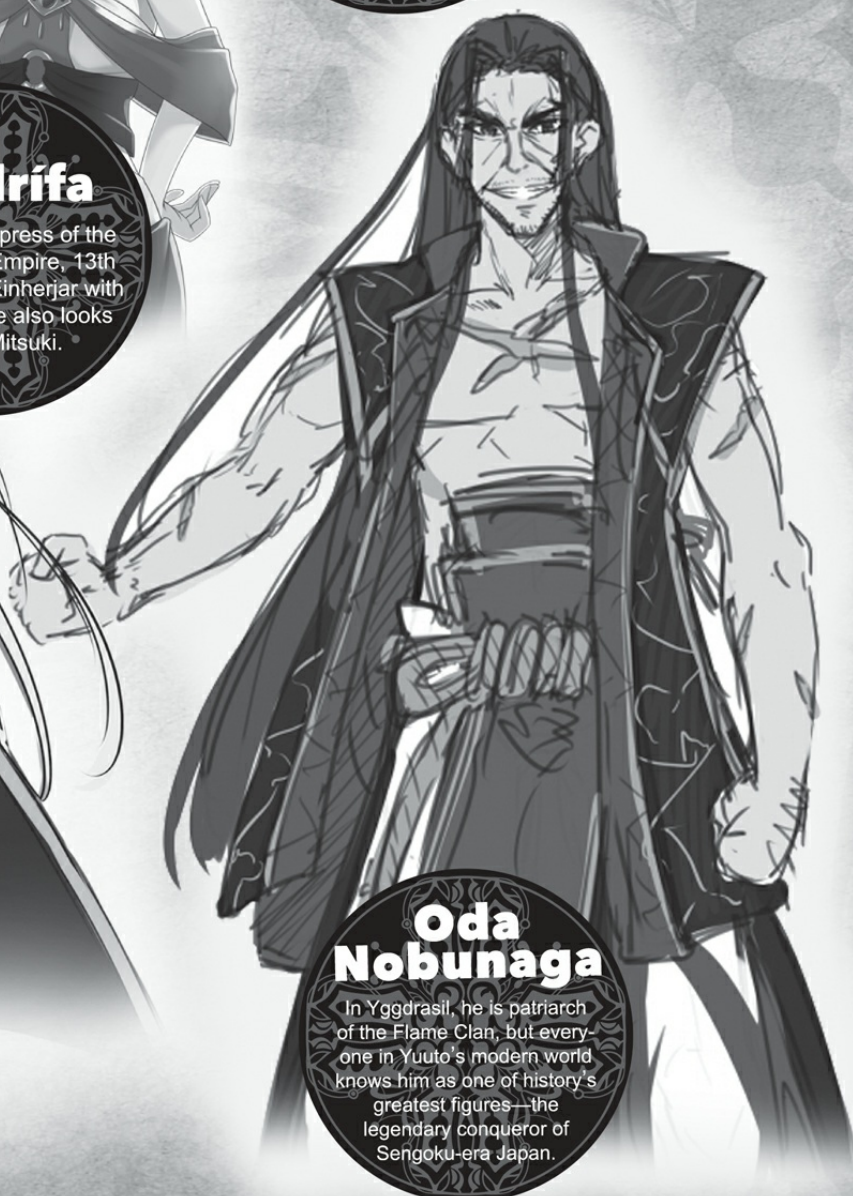
Sigdrífa

The Divine Empress of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, 13th of her line. An Einherjar with twin runes, she also looks just like Mitsuki.



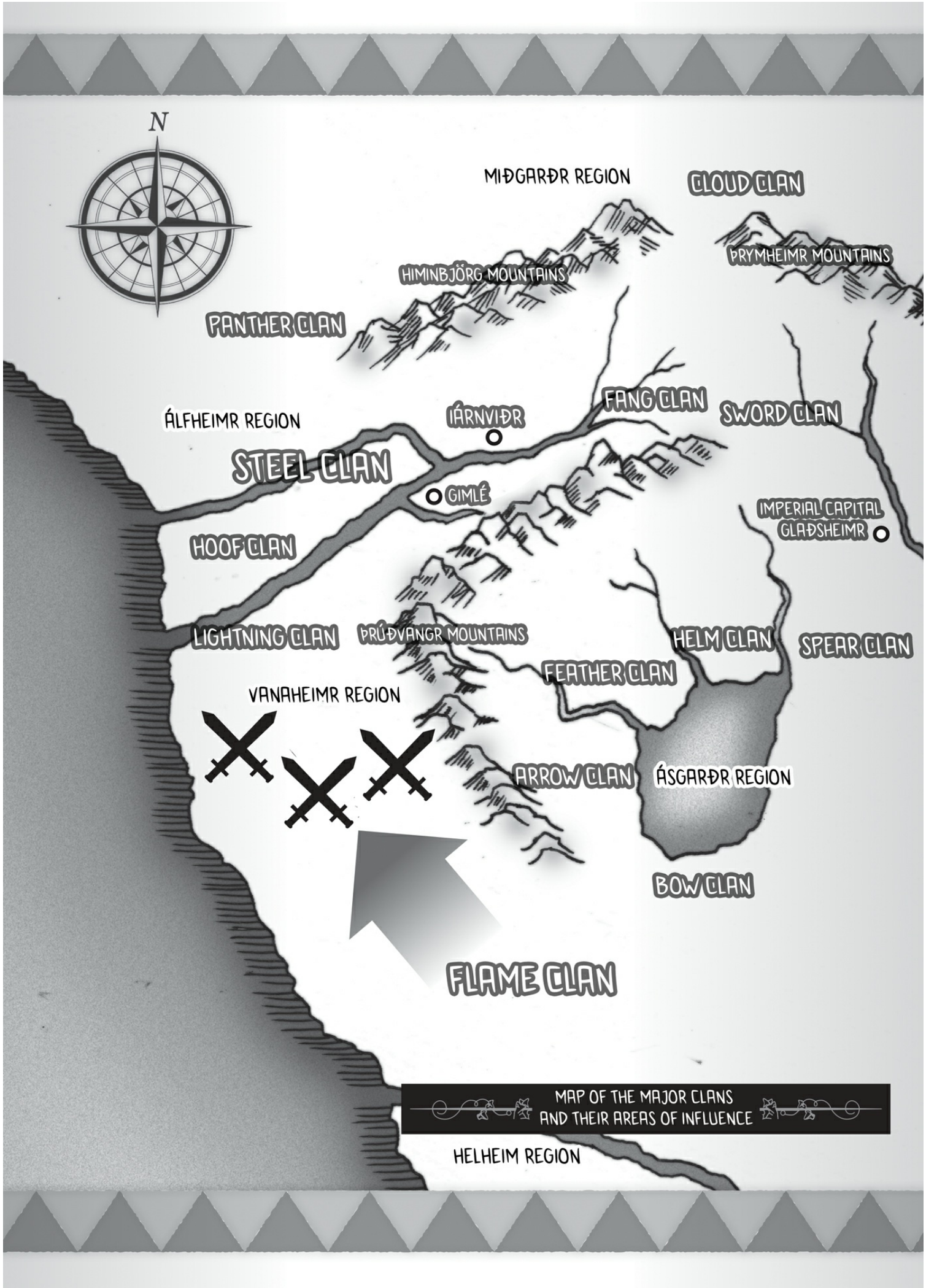
Hveðrungr

A masked Einherjar with the rune Alþjófr, Jester of a Thousand Illusions. His true identity is Loptr, Felicia's brother by birth.

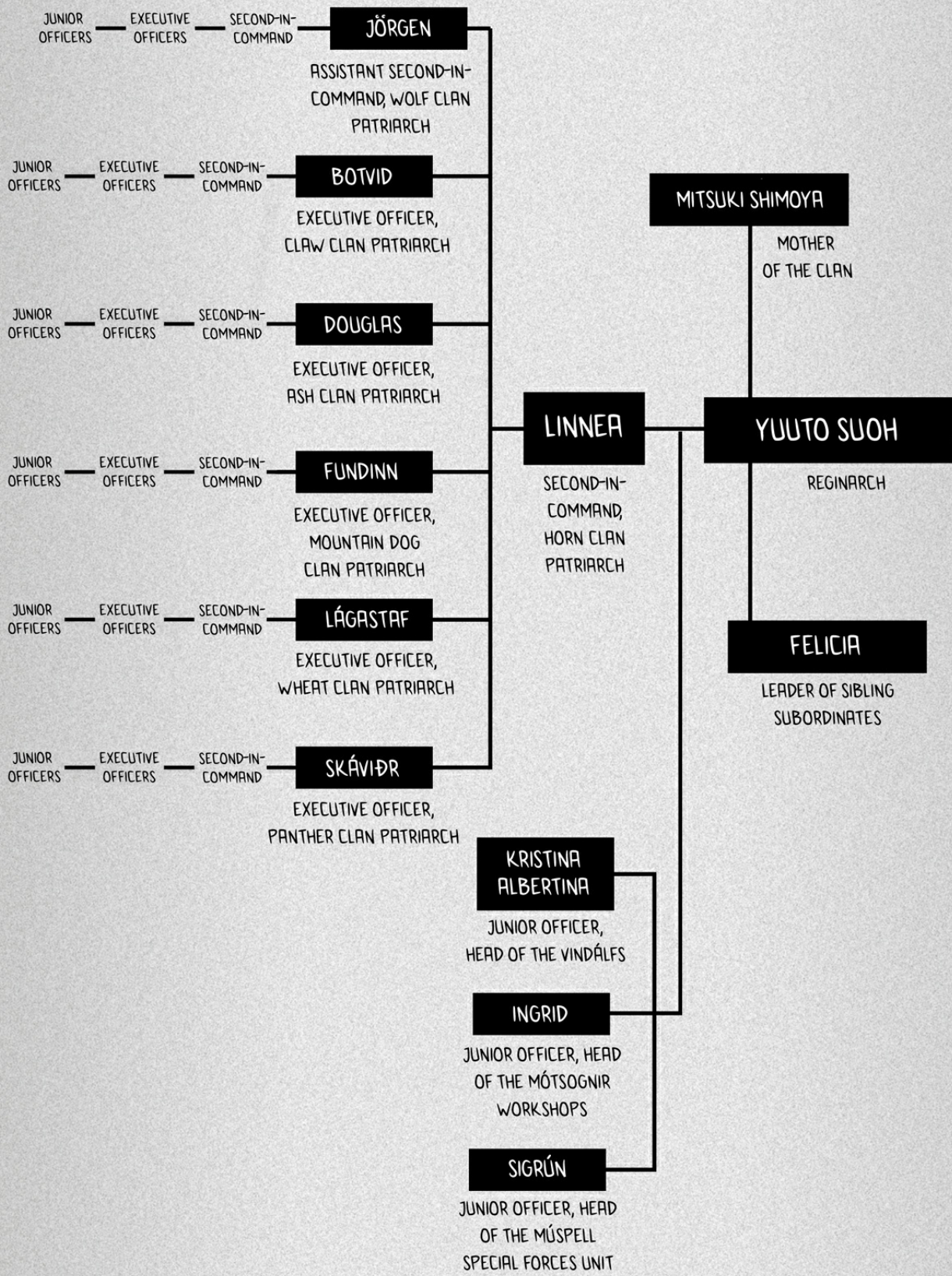


Oda Nobunaga

In Yggdrasil, he is patriarch of the Flame Clan, but everyone in Yuuto's modern world knows him as one of history's greatest figures—the legendary conqueror of Sengoku-era Japan.



HIERARCHY OF THE STEEL CLAN



PROLOGUE I

Two years ago, Yuuto had only just become a clan patriarch.

Day and night, he'd spend his free moments studying in frantic desperation, using the resources gained through the use of his smartphone.

There was so much he needed to learn, but the device could only run for about thirty minutes per charge; there was never enough time.

However, looking back on that period in hindsight, perhaps that had actually been for the best.

He'd been so desperate, so *focused* on memorizing what he read, and maybe the strict limits on his time had been part of the reason why.

There were two written works Yuuto referred to more than any other: for political theory, Machiavelli's *The Prince*, and for military strategy, Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*.

And then there was a man whose very *way of life* Yuuto took as an example on how to conduct himself, a great hero from his own country's history: Oda Nobunaga, the "Demon King" of the Sengoku period.

Nobunaga was a man who completely broke from the stagnant customs of his time and brought about a great many revolutionary changes, all founded on a logical basis.

Consolidation of a complex and piecemeal taxation system.

Policies pushing for freer, open markets to draw in new business and stimulate the economy.

Separating the military from the peasant farmers and treating them as a wholly different caste of career soldiers.

Longspears with hafts more than three times a man's height, strategically deployed in tightly-knit formations.

Novel applications of the firearm, a new projectile weapon gaining traction in

Japan at the time.

Those were just a few examples; there were far too many to list.

Yuuto, too, would need to bring about radical changes to a Wolf Clan that was small and weak in order to bolster it into something greater.

In that sense, he saw the course of Nobunaga's life and accomplishments as the greatest example to follow.

What was surprising upon further research, however, was how the Nobunaga of history was so very different from the cruel, inhumane image propagated in popular culture.

It was certainly true that he had shown absolutely no mercy to those who defied him, the most prominent case of this being when he burned down the Buddhist temples and shrines at Mount Hiei.

On the other hand, there were also several instances where he'd forgiven those who'd betrayed him. There were accounts of his mingling with the common people in celebration during a festival, or of writing a letter to the wife of one of his subordinates consoling her after she'd had a difficult fight with her husband, or of showing compassion and pity toward a physically disabled elderly man. He had a kind, empathetic, very human side as well.

The more Yuuto learned about him, the more these different facets became apparent, making him all the more fascinating as a person.

"Man, I sure wish I could meet and talk with him, just once."

Yuuto knew full well, of course, that such a thing was impossible.

He'd simply voiced the feeling aloud as it popped into his head.

At that moment, he could never have imagined that, years later, his wish would in fact be granted.

PROLOGUE II

“An order for our destruction...?” Dazed, Linnea could only repeat the messenger’s words back at him. She was having trouble understanding it.

She was a girl of around fifteen or sixteen, and though her expression was grim now, she still held an air of sweet, delicate beauty about her. With that said, she was also the exceptionally talented second-in-command of the Steel Clan, the powerful nation which controlled nearly all of the lands from Bifröst to Álfheimr.

Her ruling lord, Reginarch Suoh-Yuuto, had introduced inventions and ideas from far beyond the common sense of this era, and she was often the first to realize their true value, thanks to her intelligent and adaptable mind.

But even she needed a full few seconds to accept that what she’d heard was real.

That was just how impossible, nay, ridiculous, this scenario was to her.

“That’s absurd! Why would there be any cause for issuing such an order against us?!”

Linnea found herself up out of her seat, shouting at the messenger.

Her harsh tone of voice was unfitting behavior for her lord’s wedding ceremony, but she was well past the point of being able to pay any mind to those kinds of sensibilities.

The Holy Ásgarðr Empire was ruled by the þjóðann, whose title meant “Divine Emperor/Empress.” However, the þjóðann did not currently possess much real political power. The position held but a remnant of its former influence, retaining only its symbolic authority.

Even so, formally speaking, the þjóðann and imperial government were still recognized as holding sovereign rule over all the lands of Yggdrasil.

By designating the Steel Clan as an enemy of the empire, they had granted

every other clan in Yggdrasil an official justification to wage war against it.

Likewise, as an enemy of the empire, the Steel Clan had been branded as “evil,” and by extension, had lost its status as a legitimate government.

Within the hierarchy of the empire, clan patriarchs were technically feudal lords governing as proxies of the þjóðann, and though the relationship was little more than a nominal one, it was how the clans derived the political authority to govern their lands.

Just thinking about it made Linnea’s head hurt.

“We have always provided the empire with ample tribute. There shouldn’t be any reason they would do this to us...” a man said, his already stern expression darkening even further.

This grimacing man was Jörgen, the current patriarch of the Wolf Clan, and he had a point.

As outlined above, making an enemy of the empire was extremely problematic, while having its political backing allowed one to make full use of its symbolic authority.

And so the Steel Clan, and the Wolf Clan before it, had never been reluctant to make good use of the profits it made through the sale of glasswares. A substantial volume of gold, silver, and other treasures had been donated to the empire in generous tribute payments.

Apparently, Jörgen had been just as confused as Linnea that this situation could occur despite that consistent loyalty.

“Enemies of the empire? What’s the meaning of this?”

“Lord Reginarch, what did you do?!”

“I can’t recall Her Majesty ever issuing such an order before, not even once!”

A moment after Linnea’s remark, several of the other guests realized the significance of the subjugation order and abruptly began to speak over one another.

This was a world where faith in gods and folk superstitions still held sway in many places. The þjóðann possessed a great supernatural power in the form of

their twin runes, passed down from generation to generation, and there were few people in whom it did not inspire both reverence and fear.

“Don’t panic!” As the anxiety of the gathered crowd began to feed on itself, a single shout reverberated through the sanctuary hall like a clap of thunder.

Instantly, the crowd fell so silent you could hear a pin drop.

“This is one of the things I expected might happen. There’s no reason to panic. We’re continuing the ceremony.”

The young bridegroom addressed the room matter-of-factly, almost as if nothing had happened.

He was only seventeen, but this young man—known to them as Lord Suoh-Yuuto—had in a mere two years guided his tiny Wolf Clan into becoming what was now a member-state of the third most powerful nation in the realm of Yggdrasil. He was a heroic figure the likes of which were rarely seen.

And his commanding presence, the air of power that seemed to surround him, was likewise extraordinary.

“That’s Father for you,” Linnea said to herself, gazing at Yuuto with heartfelt respect.

The guests at this wedding ceremony were all clan patriarchs, seconds-in-command, or people of similar rank and importance from their respective clans.

They had all been stopped in their tracks and forced into silence by a single remark from Yuuto. The Steel Clan had its share of charismatic people, but he was likely the only person who could pull off such a feat.

And even in the face of this frightful development, he remained completely calm and unperturbed. It was as if the news hadn’t disturbed him in the least.

He was so reliable, someone she could truly depend on for anything.

“I knew it. There’s no way I could ever consider loving any other man than him.”

ACT 1

“Lord Yuuto! Lady Mitsuki! Congratulations and best wishes!”

“Congratulations!”

“Long live the Steel Clan!”

The citizens of Gimlé cheered, their voices a cacophony welling up from the city center.

This was the endcap of the wedding ceremony, a grand street parade.

Both sides of the main thoroughfare were full to bursting with people eager to catch a glimpse of Yuuto and his new wife.

Riding atop a horse-drawn carriage gorgeously decorated in dazzling gold and silver, Yuuto and Mitsuki acknowledged the cheers and waved back.

The atmosphere was one of total celebration and merriment, the faces of the people filled with joy...

“Dammit, this is turning into a real mess...”

...But the man of the hour was muttering bitterly to himself, even as he kept a happy smile plastered on his face.

Right now, Yuuto’s mind was completely occupied with concerns about the subjugation order issued by the þjóðann against the Steel Clan.

“Didn’t you say this was something you expected?” Mitsuki, his newly wedded wife, asked him softly, as she maintained her own smiles for the crowd.

“I was bluffing,” Yuuto replied. “A ruler’s anxiety spreads to those under him. I decided in the moment that I would act like it wasn’t a big deal.”

Continuing the ceremony and holding the parade on schedule as planned were the results of that decision.

Thanks to the use of messenger pigeons, his clan boasted an overwhelming advantage over other nations in the speed with which it could send and receive

information. Because of that, he'd figured the situation wasn't urgent enough to require immediate countermeasures on his part. That knowledge had played a part in letting him decide to go through on his bluff.

"Oh wow, I can't believe you could stay calm and consider all that in that one moment," Mitsuki said.

"I have to," Yuuto replied. "Having unexpected things like that thrown at you is something that happens all the time on the battlefield."

The commander of an army must be able to stay level-headed in any and all circumstances and maintain at least the appearance of undisturbed composure.

That was the principle that Yuuto was always holding himself to, and his efforts had paid off.

"Anyway, I can't imagine that subjugation order is something Rífa did of her own free will," Yuuto stated. "I mean, I also don't *want* to imagine that," he added, letting slip a hint of concern.

"Yeah..." Mitsuki's smiling face clouded over with worry for just a second.

From late autumn last year until this past spring, Rífa had lodged with the Wolf Clan in Íárnviðr, but she hadn't suffered any particular offenses to her honor or anything like that.

In fact, she'd quite enjoyed her time there.

And when Yuuto found himself forcibly transported back to modern Japan, she had lent her powers to help bring him back here. It would certainly be weird for her to go through all the trouble to summon him back here, just to call for a war against him.

Yuuto continued, "I'd say it's a safe bet this is someone else's work. Someone issuing the order falsely under Rífa's name."

And if that was the case, he already had a good idea as to just who it was.

With some investigation, Yuuto now knew that Rífa was currently no longer in control of the government of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire. It was running entirely at the beck and call of someone else, a certain old man.

He was the patriarch of one of the Ten Great Clans of the realm, the Spear

Clan, which protected the southern half of the central Ásgarðr region. Not only that, he was also the Imperial High Priest, one of the most powerful positions in the government...

Yuuto whispered the name. “Hárbarth. The man they call Skilfingr, the Watcher From on High...”

As his other name suggested, the old man seemed to have a keen grasp on everything happening in the empire, whether it was the secret scandals and weaknesses of the court nobles in the capital Glaðsheimr, or full details of incidents that occurred in regions far away.

Knowing everything going on in Glaðsheimr was one thing, but knowing of faraway events was quite another. In the world of Yggdrasil, where information took much longer to travel than in the 21st century, such an ability was a clear threat.

By conquering and absorbing the Panther Clan, the Steel Clan had finally become large enough to rival the two most powerful clans in the empire. Yuuto could at least praise the man for taking such immediate steps to try to cut him back down.

First things first. I will conquer Yggdrasil.

That was the oath Yuuto had sworn with himself, but it seemed the path to his goal wasn't going to be a smooth one at all.

“Kris!”

After the parade had ended and Yuuto arrived back at the palace, he immediately jumped down from the carriage and shouted the name of his subordinate. There was no longer a trace of happy newlywed in his demeanor.

“I am here, my lord.” The reply came from directly behind him.

Yuuto hadn't sensed anyone's presence, but he wasn't startled. He turned around and faced the owner of the voice, a young girl who looked to be a child of only twelve or thirteen.

“Do you have any new info?” Yuuto asked.

“From the Glaðsheimr region, I am afraid not in this short span of time.”

“Mm, I suppose that makes sense.”

“There is another matter, though...” Kristina paused. “Would it be all right if you lent me your ear for a moment?”

“Hm? What is it?” Yuuto bent down and allowed Kristina to whisper directly into his ear.



“Patriarch Douglas of the Ash Clan had a meeting with his subordinate to discuss whether it would be best for him to remain in loyal service to the Steel Clan or not.”

“...You’ve got great hearing, as always,” Yuuto said, his lips curling into a smirk.

Kristina looked for all the world like an innocent, adorable little girl, but in actuality she was a bona fide master at concealing her presence and hiding in plain sight, and an expert intelligence agent.

Douglas was, at the very least, the quality of person who’d managed to struggle his way up to patriarch of his clan. He surely had taken care to avoid attention and eavesdroppers when he had his private conversation.

But that effort was useless. Kristina still easily listened in on him without his knowledge. That was what made her so useful and reliable as Yuuto’s sworn daughter.

“Well,” Yuuto muttered indifferently, “considering this situation, I guess it’s not odd for at least one of them to act like that.”

He was bound to the other patriarchs through the Oath of the Chalice, a bond that was supposed to be thicker than blood, a bond which normally was absolutely unforgivable to break. But the subjugation order from the þjóðann carried the weight of imperial justice, and provided a perfectly valid out.

Right now, any of his sworn children could go back on their vows to him, and none could condemn them for it. Indeed, it would be perfectly natural for some of them to consider the option of betrayal as a way to ensure the survival of his or her clan.

“Looks like I was right to be quick about making my own move. How is that looking, by the way?”

“It will go off without a hitch,” Kristina replied.

“*Really*, now?” Yuuto’s eyes widened slightly. “I’m a little surprised. Considering the guy we’re talking about, I figured he might push back a bit.”

“Heh heh, it seems like he is far more afraid of making an enemy out of you

than of the empire, Father.”

“Huh. Well, if he’s going to do exactly what I want, then that works just fine for me. All right, contact the subsidiary patriarchs and inform them we’ll be meeting in the conference room at once.”

“Understood, Father.” As Kristina confirmed receipt of his command, she vanished completely from sight in an instant, as if she’d been erased.

Yuuto was no better than an amateur in the martial arts, but even so, making him lose sight of her like that was an incredible feat of stealth.

“Man, I’m so glad I made her my sworn daughter.”

At times, information was far more valuable than iron or glass.

In this instance, without prior knowledge of the fact that Douglas was wavering, the eventual betrayal might have surprised Yuuto and left him disoriented. By knowing beforehand, he could take countermeasures.

In *The Art of War*, one of Yuuto’s most prized resources, Sun Tzu also declared that spies were the cornerstone of an army.

Kristina was certainly that and more.

“All right, it looks like everyone’s here, so I’ll call this council into order,” Yuuto announced, his eyes passing over the other people seated at the round table.

Illuminated by the orange glow of the wall torches, the faces of the seven subsidiary clan patriarchs looked back at him.

Each of them had a sense of dignity and presence befitting someone who had risen to the position of holding together and controlling a clan.

Yuuto continued. “I’m sorry for bringing you together so late at night like this, but I’m sure you’re all aware of why I had to.”

They all nodded firmly. Yuuto confirmed that everyone understood before continuing.

“Indeed, it’s the imperial subjugation order against the Steel Clan, said to

have been issued by the þjóðann. It's unclear why Her Majesty would issue such a declaration against us. Currently, I'm having Kristina investigate that."

"Pardon me," one of the patriarchs spoke up. "During the ceremony earlier, did you not say that this event was within your expectations?" The man's voice was suspicious.

He was Fundinn, patriarch of the Mountain Dog Clan. His clan was based in the steep slopes of the Himinbjörg Mountains, and Fundinn indeed looked every bit the part of a stereotypical "mountain man." His lips and chin were hidden beneath a rough beard, his hairy arms and chest were visible from within the gaps in his clothes... and he had a stare as sharp as a hawk's.

"If you anticipated this situation in advance, you must have had some basis for doing so. Would it be possible for you to tell us?" he asked. His suspicious eyes pressed at Yuuto.

There was enough pressure behind that glare to make a normal man shudder in fear, but Yuuto took it in stride.

"All right," he replied. "To put it frankly, it's the fact that we've grown too large and powerful in such a short time. Large enough for the imperial government to start fearing they might get replaced before too long."

The logic made sense on its face, but it was actually just reasoning Yuuto had thrown together after the fact, during the parade. He'd figured that after publicly stating the situation was within his expectations, he'd get a question or two along these lines.

However, he also didn't think the logic of the statement was too far off the mark, either.

The þjóðann Rífa was a different matter, but Hárbarth was the one actually in control of the empire at the moment, and his motivations for creating this situation were probably somewhere along those lines.

"The nail that sticks out gets hammered down. That's the way it's always been. There's no merit in us debating the 'why' of that. Instead, I want to discuss the near-term problems this subjugation order is likely going to lead to."

"...I understand, Father," Fundinn said with a nod, though his face showed

that he didn't fully accept Yuuto's explanation.

The fact that he was still willing to be silent and back down on the point showed just how much he agreed with everyone else that the other problems were more pressing.

"Because of the subjugation order, all of the other clans in Yggdrasil have a sanctioned reason to attack and invade the Steel Clan. That said, I highly doubt any of their patriarchs are going to do us a favor and lead their clan across our border all on their lonesome. They know just how much difference there is in military strength between us and any one of them."

Right now the Steel Clan was bordered on the west by what remained of the Panther and Hoof Clans, to the south by the Lightning Clan, and to the east by the Fang and Cloud Clans.

Five clans, but none of them worthy of being called a formidable opponent right now.

However...

"Here's what I'm most fearful of," Yuuto explained. "It's that this subjugation order gives all of our surrounding clans the perfect justification to come together and form an alliance. Individually, each one of them wouldn't be much of a threat to the Steel Clan, but if a bunch of them all attacked at once, I have to admit we'd have a seriously hard time taking them on."

There was also the fact that the influence of the imperial order might help make it easier for those surrounding clans to get even more assistance from clans that didn't border the Steel Clan.

The Steel Clan didn't have enough resources to take on everyone at once.

Everyone at this table was someone capable of running a clan, of ruling and holding together a nation. They understood just how serious this situation was. The air around the table was gloomy and oppressive.

"And," Yuuto went on, "I imagine that alliance is exactly what's going to happen. After all, the clans around us feel even more threatened than the empire does by our expansion. This situation is the perfect opportunity for them."

Under normal circumstances, getting five different clans to all march in lockstep would be an exercise in futility.

Each clan had its own motives and goals, different things they stood to lose or gain in a war campaign. Trying to get them to take on risk and work with each other would be no simple task.

The imperial subjugation order created a scenario where they could do just that. Everyone would be marching to war together under the imperial banner.

Looking through history, one can see quite a few examples of when small armies or states banded together to take on a powerful force that would have overwhelmed them individually.

There was the case of the ascendance of the state of Qin at the end of China's Spring and Autumn period, which led to the other six smaller states attempting to form an alliance against Qin to keep its expansion in check.

Then there was the Japanese Sengoku period, where the so-called "Nobunaga Encirclement" coalition was formed between multiple warlords wary of Oda Nobunaga and the Oda clan's rise to power.

In particular, the Sengoku example had a lot in common with the situation happening now. The shogun of the time, Ashikaga Yoshiaki, issued an edict under the authority of the Emperor of Japan calling for all warlords to unite against Nobunaga. This served as a powerful uniting force which led to the anti-Nobunaga coalition.

"If I'm gonna be frank here, I think there's a good chance an alliance against us has already been formed at this point. They always say, 'The most successful schemes are those drawn up in secrecy,' after all. If the subjugation order's being made public, it means they've all finished making their preparations."

The sound of nervous gulping could be heard throughout the chamber.

If Yuuto's prediction was correct, that would mean that in the very near future, their enemies would be attacking in tandem with armies from all sides.

Their numbers would total in the tens of thousands...

"This is a desperate situation with everyone's lives on the line. I know some of

you may be reluctant to go to war with the empire.” Yuuto stopped and looked at each of the patriarchs in turn, one by one. “If you wish to return my Chalice, and exchange the wine you drank for water, then say so here and now. I will not consider it a crime. I’ll make sure you get safely back to your people.”

“...!!” The others all gasped at Yuuto’s sudden proposal, their eyes wide.

The phrase “exchange the wine for water” meant rejecting the sacred wine that had been drunk while exchanging the Oath of the Chalice, and thus meant breaking the bond between sworn parent and child.

As evidenced by all of their discussion thus far, right now Yuuto and the Steel Clan needed every ally they could get. Yet here he was saying he would not stop any of them from walking out on him. It was enough to make them question if he was in his right mind.

However, the next words out of Yuuto’s mouth made them all realize exactly how much of a mistake that was.

“Well, of course, that means that the next time we meet, it’ll be on the battlefield as enemies, and I’ll do everything in my power to crush you.”

Yuuto’s lips curled up into a sinister grin, and there was an intense light burning in his eyes. That light was evidence that, no matter how hopeless the situation seemed, he clearly had every intention and expectation of winning in the end.

And the record of Yuuto’s many accomplishments so far were clear evidence that he wasn’t bluffing.

The patriarchs were all stunned into silence by Yuuto’s intensity, unable to speak, until finally one of them suddenly burst out laughing.

“Heh, hah hah hah! Just as bold and spirited as you always have been! I’d expect no less from the man I’ve asked to marry my daughters. I know this might be a little forward, it being your wedding day and all, but I must ask you again. Would you not be willing to accept the two of them? I don’t mind if it’s as concubines instead of wives.”

This man was Botvid, patriarch of the Claw Clan.

He'd said his piece with a chuckle, as if he were only joking around, but the contents of his request were no laughing matter.

He was indirectly saying that he would be willing to offer up his two daughters to Yuuto as hostages, as a guarantee of his loyalty.

"O-Oh, well if that's how it's going to be, then please, I'd like you to take my daughter as well!" Fundinn hurriedly cut in. "She's not as pretty and refined as those city girls, but she's a healthy girl with lots of stamina. I'm sure she'll give you strong children."

"Oh, my, then I might as well join in and ask, would you be willing to take my daughter too?"

With a chuckle, the woman known as Lágastaf spoke up as well. She was the patriarch of the Wheat Clan.

Since Yuuto was from Japan, when he'd first heard the name Lágastaf, it had sounded more or less like a male name to him, but the owner of said name was a charming and beautiful woman in her late twenties.

Apparently her husband had been the previous clan patriarch, but had died young, and his child subordinates had advocated for her to succeed him.

At first she looked like a calm, mild-mannered woman, but though her nation was small, she was a clan patriarch. There was certainly more to her.

The Wheat Clan was a very small and militarily weak nation, and she'd managed to preserve its existence as the power balance shifted by changing its allegiances over the years, from the Rhinoceros Clan to the Hoof Clan, and at last to the Wolf Clan. She clearly possessed a good instinct for diplomacy.

If a woman like her announced she was staying on Yuuto's side, that meant something.

"I-I want you to take me in as well!" The Horn Clan patriarch Linnea spoke up next, her voice raised almost as if in protest to Lágastaf.

"Unfortunately I have no daughter to offer, but when the time comes to go to battle, I hope that you might honor me by sending me to fight at the front line."

"And I'd love to say 'take my daughter too,' but I think you're already

surrounded by more beautiful girls than you know what to do with, Father.”

Next to join in was the Panther Clan patriarch, Skáviðr, his face as stone-serious as always. He was followed swiftly by the Wolf Clan patriarch, Jörgen, who ended his line with a playful wink and chuckle.

These last three people had been Yuuto’s allies since his days as the Wolf Clan patriarch, and they were steadfastly devoted to him.

There was no reason he could have to doubt their loyalty.

There was only one person left now, the Ash Clan patriarch Douglas.

He gave a sigh that sounded almost impressed, and said, “I was thinking of bringing my wife and children to visit Gimlé and see the sights. I wonder if that might be all right with you?”

Douglas’ expression looked somehow brighter, as if a weight had been lifted from him.

He had been struggling with whether to side with Yuuto or with the empire, but it seemed like this council meeting had helped bring him to an answer.

“Well now, Father, I’m quite impressed by just how dramatic an actor you are. To be honest, when you first delivered your line, even I shuddered a little, and I’d heard about the plan beforehand. My voice was firmly trapped in my throat!”

The meeting had ended, and after parting ways with everyone and returning to his office, Yuuto was listening to Botvid pepper him with cheery flattery.

The Claw Clan patriarch was a heavyset man with a bit of a belly, a half-receded hairline, and a very friendly smile that seemed to mark him as a boring, middle-aged man. But in reality, both inside and outside of his clan, Botvid had a reputation as a cunning and able ruler.

Yuuto shrugged and let out a bitter laugh. “We’re desperate here, of course I’m gonna put everything I have into the act. If I sit back and let people pretend like they’re on my side, and then when the chips are down they end up turning on me, there’s nothing I can do then.”

It wasn't just about Douglas. It was easy enough for Yuuto to imagine that several of the other patriarchs could also have been struggling with deciding whose side to take.

The powerful bond between sworn parent and child existed precisely to prevent that sort of thing, but the imperial subjugation order had flipped everything on its head, practically sending things back to where they were before Yuuto swore the Oath of the Chalice with them in the first place.

That's why Yuuto had sent a contact to Botvid before the council meeting, and they'd agreed to put on this show. It was partially to deter the other patriarchs from considering defection, and partly to gauge where they stood.

"Too true. Still, I never expected to see things go so exactly as scripted. I see you are quite the schemer, Father."

"Hey, it's not like I came up with the idea on my own. I basically mimicked a historical event known as the Oyama Council. Well, either way, I appreciate you working with me, Botvid. It's thanks to you that things went so smoothly."

"The 'Oyama Council,' you say. It's an unfamiliar name to me. Do you think you could tell me about it?"

"So in the country I came from, a long time ago, there was this *huge* battle between the Eastern and Western Armies at a place called Sekigahara. The leader of the Eastern Army was Tokugawa Ieyasu, but loyalties were complicated at the time, and lots of his prospective generals were still on the fence about whether they would commit to fighting on his side. He talks to a powerful general named Fukushima Masanori and wins him over. The clever thing is how he uses Fukushima strategically. He calls a war council at Oyama, and has Fukushima very publicly 'decide' then and there that he's committing to Tokugawa's side. As soon as that happens, almost all of the other generals start pledging to him too, like an avalanche."

"Oho..." Botvid leaned in closer to Yuuto, listening closely with interest.

"There's even more to it," Yuuto continued. "To reach the battlefield at Sekigahara, Tokugawa Ieyasu has to march through a region of the country called Tokaido. One of the warlords guarding the local area, Yamauchi Kazutoyo, said, 'Hey, you can rest in my castle.' The story goes that afterwards,

other local lords in the Tokaido area all followed suit.”

“I see, I see.” Botvid was nodding to himself in understanding.

He’d always been a man who specialized in trickery and finesse; it was how he rose to power as a patriarch. It seemed he’d gotten the gist of the principle at play just from hearing those two examples.

The human heart is weak. It’s scary to commit to a difficult decision alone, and tempting to wait for someone stronger or more accomplished to make a decision and then trust that they were correct.

It’s also difficult to be the only person in the room to voice opposition. Then there’s the strong sense of pressure when others begin to commit to a choice, the fear of being left out if one doesn’t hurry to join them.

Tokugawa Ieyasu had made clever use of that psychology, indirectly compelling the generals to join his side.

“Still, I never expected that you would pick me, of all people, to assist you. The people of the Wolf Clan think of me as a venomous snake, after all.” Botvid chuckled wryly and slumped his shoulders.

Before Yuuto first arrived in Yggdrasil, Botvid had betrayed an alliance with the Wolf Clan. He’d taken advantage of the fact that, immediately after taking power from his predecessor, the previous Oath of the Chalice between the clans was invalid, and he’d attacked before there was a chance to react. He’d seized a great deal of territory from the Wolf Clan back then.

Ever since then, the people of the Wolf Clan viewed him with distrust and contempt.

“That was exactly why I picked you. No offense, but you’ve got a reputation as a sly bastard, so if someone like you is the first one to pledge yourself to my side, the others are going to start to see staying in the Steel Clan as the clever choice. Don’t you agree?”

“Hmm. That is true. However, you were also revealing a weakness in your position to me, and I could have turned around and used that against you. Did you not consider that?”

Asking Botvid to cooperate also meant admitting to him that the help was needed, showing him that the situation really was dire for the Steel Clan.

Played poorly, there was a good enough chance that a shrewd man like Botvid could take this as a sign and escape from his subordination to the Steel Clan.

In fact, Felicia had been very disapproving of the idea of using Botvid's help.

However, Yuuto moved forward anyway, convinced this was the best way.

The reason for that conviction was...

"Face it, you actually think really highly of me, don't you?"

Yuuto said this with a completely confident, broad smile, flashing his teeth.

For a brief moment, Botvid appeared dumbstruck, looking at Yuuto and blinking in a puzzled manner.

"You aren't saying that's the only reason you trusted me?" Botvid asked, a much more dubious expression on his face.

"I'm not allowed to make that my reason?" Yuuto responded.

"No, it's not that... Still, that sort of evaluation can change according to the circumstances..."

"I said *really* highly, though. I was sure of it after what happened during the Battle of Körmt River."

Back then, Yuuto had been forcibly sent back to modern Japan by Sigyn's seiðr magic. The Wolf Clan was in an even more hopeless situation at that point than the Steel Clan was right now.

The Lightning Clan army had surrounded Gimlé, and the Panther Clan army had surrounded Fólkvangr. It had seemed like the Wolf Clan was on the verge of being snuffed out.

Even if Yuuto were to make it back to Yggdrasil, it was too late to change anything... That was the logical way of looking at it. And, in fact, the other clans subsidiary to the Wolf Clan at the time had held back from aiding them, remaining neutral until Yuuto finally crushed the Panther Clan army at the Battle of Körmt River.

However, as soon as Botvid heard that Yuuto had returned, he'd committed his troops as reinforcements without hesitation.

Such a cold, calculating man wouldn't make such a risky bet if he saw no good chance of winning. In other words, he had his own conviction supporting his choice.

He'd believed that even in such a hopelessly disadvantageous situation, Yuuto would lead the Wolf Clan to victory.

"Thinking back on it now, you also sent your twins over to me at a pretty early stage, too. Normally, it's crazy to think that you'd just give up having two people that talented at your side."

Kristina was serving as Yuuto's eyes and ears, and her usefulness went without saying. Albertina was also much more than the innocent fool of a child she appeared to be.

She was friendly, sociable and overall adorable, and the people of lárarviðr and Gimlé loved her.

Botvid could have set up the popular and charming Albertina as a future patriarch, the clan's public face, while having her cool, level-headed sister Kristina support her as second-in-command with her intelligence and decision-making.

Do that, and the future of the Claw Clan would be secured for sure.

There was no way Botvid hadn't realized that his daughters had what it takes to be future leaders of the clan.

And yet he'd still sent them to Yuuto.

"As a patriarch, I've had the chance to observe a fair number of people," Yuuto said. "And I think I've noticed something essential about them. People might lie with their words, but not with their actions."

In other words, whether Botvid liked or disliked Yuuto, his actions had stated that he was willing to take on a sizable amount of personal risk in order to foster and improve his relationship with Yuuto.

Machiavelli, author of *The Prince*, also wrote, "It is former enemies who

endeavor to serve the prince with the greatest loyalty. Princes have found that they extract more loyalty and use out of those men who they distrusted in the beginning than among those who were trusted friends since the beginning. They will be forced to serve the prince with loyalty because they know it is necessary for them to cancel by their deeds the bad impression the prince had formed of them.”

This was why Yuuto had guessed that Botvid would agree to his suggestion to work together, that he would see it as a good opportunity.

“Heh heh heh, I see now. Kris did tell me that about you, Father. She said you are not tied down by your emotions and can see things from a grander viewpoint. She truly was right; you are quite perceptive!”

Botvid slapped his knee with a hand and laughed aloud.

“Does that mean I was right?” Yuuto asked.

“It does. I’m sure you might have already heard as much from Kris, but from the bottom of my heart, you are the one person I don’t ever want to make my enemy. You frighten me more than the empire or the þjóðann ever would. Perhaps this incident has made those other patriarchs more acutely aware of how frightening you are.” Botvid snickered to himself, a laugh that was mean, but also full of real enjoyment.

Yuuto understood the meaning in what he was saying.

The Ash Clan patriarch Douglas, as well as any other person in the council meeting who had been questioning their loyalty, would have heard Yuuto’s words and felt afraid that he was speaking with *them* in mind, paranoid that he’d seen right through them.

That would in turn make them afraid to think of betraying him.

This, too, was another refrain found in Machiavelli’s words:

“It is safer to be feared than to be loved. People and men have less scruple in offending one who is beloved than one who is feared, for love is preserved by the link of obligation which, owing to the baseness of men, is broken at every opportunity for their advantage; but fear preserves you by a dread of punishment which never fails.”

It wasn't exactly the best example of "a crisis bringing people closer together," but the subjugation order against the Steel Clan had caused an internal disturbance that, in the end, had led to an even stronger bond of loyalty between Yuuto and his subordinates.

It was a short while after Yuuto's confidential meeting with Botvid had concluded. Under the faint glow of a torch flame, Yuuto made his way alone up a set of dark and gloomy tower stairs.

He'd made Felicia wait for him outside.

This was Nari Tower. Tucked away in a far corner of Gimlé's palace grounds, it was a prison tower reserved especially for those of high status.

The place was completely quiet, and Yuuto's footsteps seemed almost unnaturally loud against the silence.

At present, there was only one prisoner being held here.

"Well, now. Here's a face I haven't seen in a while."

As Yuuto arrived on the top floor, the man in the cell there greeted him in a cheerful voice.

A jet-black mask concealed the upper half of the man's face, which lent a distinctive, dubious quality to his appearance.

His name was Hveðrungr, and he was the former patriarch of the Panther Clan. But to Yuuto, he was much more than that...

"And here I was thinking you'd long since forgotten all about me."

"Yeah, long time no see, Big Brother. I'd planned to come visit once things settled down a bit, but that ended up taking quite a while."

...He had also once been Yuuto's sworn older brother, and the two of them had long been bound by a fateful connection.

When Yuuto first met him, his name had been Loptr, and he had been part of the Wolf Clan. In those days, Yuuto had only just arrived in Yggdrasil, unable to speak the language or support himself. While the other locals ridiculed Yuuto with the name "Sköll" — meaning "Devourer of Blessings" — Loptr had been

different. Together with his biological younger sister Felicia, Loptr had taken care of Yuuto, believed in him, and encouraged him... However, when he lost the position of patriarch to Yuuto, Loptr lost his mind in a fit of jealous rage and tried to kill him, then fled the clan when that attempt failed.

“Speaking of settling down, I hear you’ve married that childhood friend of yours. I suppose I should say ‘Congratulations.’”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“And yet, I hear you’ve also taken Felicia into your bed as well?”

Hveðrungr’s voice was chilly, and he stared at Yuuto through narrowed eyes. He must have heard about that directly from Felicia.

“That’s right,” Yuuto replied bluntly. “I’m sorry. I know you said you’d never forgive me having other relationships if I got together with her.”

“And didn’t I say that if you ever did that, I’d kill you?”

“That was if I ‘made her cry,’ remember? So far, I haven’t done that.”

Of course, Yuuto had made Felicia cry *out* quite a few times at this point, but he decided it was fine not to bring that up.

Hveðrungr seemed somewhat unsatisfied by Yuuto’s response. “Hmph. You’ve got a good memory. Well, she herself did seem happy with the arrangement, so I suppose I’ll let it go. Besides, even if I wanted to punish you, I’m in no position to.”

He tapped his hand against the thick wooden bars that partitioned the space between the two of them.

As an Einherjar, he was strong, but breaking the bars of this cell with one’s bare hands would still be next to impossible without the sort of monstrous strength possessed by Steinþórr of the Lightning Clan.

In this state, he wouldn’t be able to even get close to Yuuto, much less kill him.

“Let’s move on.” Hveðrungr said. “Tell me, what finally brought you here after all this time?”

Yuuto nodded. "I wanted to discuss a few things with you," he began, and sat down on the floor.

"Come on, now, are you really doing that? A noble patriarch, sitting himself on the bare and dirty floor?" Hveðrungr asked in an exasperated tone.

"Hey, if we're going to have a long talk, then I'm not going to wear myself out doing it standing up." An impish grin appeared on Yuuto's face as he replied.

Talking casually like this, taking jabs at each other, was something they had a habit of doing two years ago, too.

Yuuto felt a bit of nostalgic comfort in it. It also made his heart ache just a little.

"You want to ask me why I tried to kill you. Am I right?" Hveðrungr asked, attempting to get straight to the point.

However, Yuuto shook his head.

"No. I don't need to, not anymore. You'd spent your whole life aiming to become patriarch, risked everything for it, only to have the little brother you'd been looking after come and snatch it right out from in front of you. Of course you'd want to kill me." Yuuto let out a self-derisive chuckle and slumped his shoulders.

"Well now, you've certainly gotten more philosophical about that sort of thing, haven't you?"

"I've been a patriarch for two years, and I've seen so many people driven to chase after power and authority, latching onto it like they're possessed. I've had no choice but to learn to look at it less personally."

"It's a little insulting to be lumped in together with those people, but I suppose I can't argue, can I?" Hveðrungr said, chuckling.

Authority, the promise of power over others, seemed to have a twisted effect on people at times, as if it summoned a demon into their hearts. Killing in order to gain that power, even among one's own flesh-and-blood kin, wasn't exactly a rare occurrence.

Yuuto wasn't going to ask "why?" at this point. In that sense, he wasn't a child

anymore.

“That’s all in the past; it doesn’t matter. Actually, I’m a lot more pissed at you for burning down lands in your own Panther Clan territory.”

“Ah, yes, that.” Hveðrungr nodded, as if he were ready for that question too.

His voice betrayed no emotion at all, as though he were completely indifferent to the subject.

In other words, despite the fact that he’d burned the very lands he held rule over and inflicted incredible suffering over the subjects he was obligated to defend, he didn’t feel even a shred of guilt over what he’d done.

“You don’t regret doing that at all, do you?” Yuuto asked, looking for confirmation.

“Are you going to attack me for it like Felicia did? Call me ‘atrocious and inhumane’? Ask me, ‘Do you even have a human conscience?!’ perhaps?” Hveðrungr’s tone was melodramatic, and he shot Yuuto a meaningful look as he awaited an answer.

Yuuto got the sense that he was being tested here.

He shook his head once more.

“I don’t intend to condemn you for it, no. As a war strategy, it was extremely effective. The cleanup and aftermath were hell, and it was a serious blow to the Steel Clan in terms of both finances and food supplies.”

When Yuuto had formulated his initial war plans, he’d thought that after subjugating the Panther Clan in the west, he could swing back around and defeat the Lightning Clan too, taking care of both of the two greatest threats to his clan. He’d planned to be recovered and ready to start moving in on central Ásgarðr before the end of the summer.

Instead, the Panther Clan’s scorched-earth strategy had made it so that Yuuto couldn’t make any more military moves until at least after the autumn harvest, causing an unavoidable delay in his overall plans.

Yuuto could say that Hveðrungr’s move had been terribly effective, with painful, long-lasting repercussions.

“Heh heh heh, of course it was. Even thinking back on it now, at that moment, in the conditions I was under, there was no more effective method I could have chosen. If I regret anything, it’s that I didn’t persevere with it. I should have continued burning the land for even *longer*.”

Hveðrungr said this firmly and without hesitation.

It came through clear in both his words and his tone that he didn’t regret anything.

“I know I said the past doesn’t matter anymore, but I did remember there was one thing I wanted to ask about the past,” Yuuto said. “It’s about you killing Dad. Do you regret *that*?”

The “Dad” Yuuto was asking about was his sworn father Fárbaudi, the old man who had been Wolf Clan patriarch before him. Fárbaudi had died after throwing himself in front of Yuuto to protect him from Loptr’s sword attack.

Fárbaudi had been Loptr’s sworn father as well, and Loptr had only killed him by accident. Any normal person would be tormented by their own guilty conscience over such a thing.

“Hmm, suppose you could say I do. Back then, I was so overwhelmed with anger that my mind went blank, and I acted impulsively. I should have bided my time and made the proper preparations before taking action. If I’d done that, Father wouldn’t have had to die either.”

As expected, there was something frighteningly *off* about Hveðrungr’s response.

Talking with him like this, he still had a mild-mannered air about him that was reminiscent of his days as Loptr, but behind that there was an *emptiness* that sent a chill down Yuuto’s spine.

What Hveðrungr regretted was only that he himself hadn’t been able to achieve his goals, and hadn’t gotten what he wanted. Pangs of guilt over what he’d done, or sorrow over losing his sworn father... none of that was present.

So this is what a so-called “psychopath” looks like, huh? Yuuto thought to himself.

Supposedly, what these sorts of people had in common was that they were smooth talkers, sociable, and could often appear charismatic and charming, but were frighteningly lacking in compassion or empathy towards other people.

Also, while they tended to be meticulous and careful planners, at times they could “snap” and lash out impulsively.

That description fit this man completely.

Two years ago, Yuuto had totally failed to see him for what he was.

Of course, unlike right now, back then Loptr had been making sure to act like a normal person. Even still, when Yuuto thought back on it, it felt like he could now see the signs, various hints in the man’s past words and actions.

Back then, that cold, rational, and calculating aspect of him had come across to Yuuto as something adult-like and mature. Yuuto had admired him for it.

Now, he saw it as something frightening. And now, even more than two years ago, he saw it as something incredibly *promising*.

“Do you still want to kill me now, assuming you could?” Yuuto asked, both out of curiosity and as a test.

“Hm? No. I don’t expect you to believe me, but I don’t have any desire to kill you at all.” Hveðrungr’s answer was straightforward and sounded natural.

Of course, Yuuto didn’t intend to take his words at face value, but he felt that he could put at least some level of trust in them.

There was no longer any trace of that intense loathing he’d felt when they’d crossed swords face-to-face at Náströnd.

Nor did he get the sense that Hveðrungr was merely suppressing his hatred in order to get onto Yuuto’s good side.

In a word, he seemed *uninterested*.

“For so long, I had thought to myself that all you had was borrowed power, no actual strength of your own, and that you’d stolen my spot as patriarch away by cheating.”

“If you didn’t have that smartphone or whatever it’s called, you wouldn’t be

able to do anything.’ I remember. The fact is, at the time, that much was true about me.”

Two years earlier, just before making the attempt on Yuuto’s life, Hveðrungr—in his final moments as Loptr—had spit those hateful words at him, and they had been carved into his heart like some sort of curse. Even now, he could never forget them.

In those days, Yuuto had thought of the knowledge and information he obtained through his smartphone as if it were his own knowledge, his own power.

Of course, that wasn’t so. Yuuto would have lost all of it if he had lost the phone. Everything that had made him useful, earned him appreciation, had been separate from himself, connected to him by nothing more than that thin, fragile thread.

Yuuto shuddered at the thought of what might have happened if that misconception had continued to grow within him. In that sense, Loptr’s words had served Yuuto well, as an admonition and a check on his ego that had helped make him into the person he was now.

Hveðrungr let out a small, self-derisive chuckle and looked down at the palms of his hands.

“Heh, I have no right to say anything on the matter, though. All of the powers and techniques I use were taken from others, after all. Perhaps that’s why, deep in the recesses of my heart, I felt like none of them were ever truly my own.”

“...I’m surprised, I didn’t expect you had that sort of thing weighing on you. You always seemed like you were brimming with confidence.”

“It was because I had no confidence in myself. I was always putting on a false front.”

“I see, so that’s how it was. ...Or, maybe that’s how it *is*, for that kind of thing.”

Hveðrungr’s power was that of imitation.

He could steal any and all techniques from others, copying them for himself.

That was true even for abilities and techniques that had taken months or years for the other person to develop and master.

However, people have no personal connection to things they obtain without any work. It is that effort put into something, that personal history, that translates into true confidence.

Yuuto had learned that through his experiences with learning to refine iron.

Hveðrungr, on the other hand, could simply perform any new skills immediately, and so he couldn't believe in himself, and only emptiness had filled his heart.

"I understand the truth, now. Or, rather, during my last duel with Skáviðr, I was forced to understand. I had focused so much hatred towards you because of my own feelings of inferiority."

"So you hated me because we were similar," Yuuto said.

"Exactly. The person I really felt such bitter hatred for, the one whom I really wanted to kill, was none other than myself, the weak me who had nothing to call his own. Heh, it's almost too funny, isn't it?"

There is a particular situation in psychology where someone sees a quality they dislike in themselves represented in another person, and they come to dislike that other person intensely because of it.

In those situations, they might become obsessed with thoroughly denouncing and attacking the other for their faults, while completely disregarding the same in themselves.

Yuuto, in the interests of improving his skills as a patriarch, had studied a little bit of psychology and knew that the technical term for this phenomenon was "projection." By projecting their own hated faults onto another person, one could avoid thinking about their own ugly side and maintain their sense of personal pride.

Basically, Loptr had been holding onto a serious inferiority complex about himself because he felt he had no strength of his own, only that which he borrowed from others. And watching Yuuto, someone else with nothing but borrowed strength, become patriarch instead of himself, his hatred of that

weakness had ballooned beyond his ability to suppress, and exploded violently.

“It was all so simple once I realized it. What I really wanted wasn’t to become patriarch. I wanted to be recognized as better than everyone else, and in doing so, prove that I had strength of my own. After all, the person recognized as the best couldn’t possibly be a fake.”

Here in Yggdrasil, power was everything. Only the best, those with real strength, rose above others to become patriarch.

In that sense, the position of patriarch had been the ideal goal for him to strive for, as it was an easy-to-understand expression of genuine power.

“To find something within myself that’s truly mine, something that only I have. That is what I truly want. I no longer have any interest in you.”

“No interest, huh?” Yuuto muttered.

After all of the irrational hatred, the obsession this man had shown towards him, it had all been put aside so simply.

That was one other thing about this man that was hard for Yuuto to understand, and it only reinforced how abnormal he was.

“If that’s how it is, then I guess I’ll head out. I got the answers I wanted.”

Yuuto hoisted himself back up to his feet.

He turned his back to Hveðrungr and made for the room’s exit.

“I think you’ve already got talent of your own that’s plenty amazing, though.”

Yuuto muttered those final words and descended the stairs.

From Yuuto’s perspective as Hveðrungr’s enemy in war, the most terrifying thing about him wasn’t his ability to copy techniques. It was the underlying ability that made his imitation possible: his incredible powers of observation.

It was one of the most difficult abilities for army commanders to train, and also one of the most powerful weapons at their disposal.

If Hveðrungr hadn’t been so distracted by his reliance on skills from others, if he’d been able to realize this core strength of his and grow it even further, perhaps the victor in their last war would have been different.

But it would do him no good hearing that from someone else. He wouldn't be able to accept the results unless he discovered it for himself.

As Yuuto exited the tower, Felicia ran over to him. "How did it go?" she asked, worry in her voice.

Yuuto looked up at the starry sky.

"I don't feel good about talking about your brother this way to your face, but he's a horrible person."

First and foremost, Hveðrungr was completely self-centered.

He was only interested in himself, or things as they pertained to himself. And in order to satisfy his own selfish interests, he was willing to deceive others, or trample them underfoot, all without feeling the slightest pang of guilt whatsoever for those he hurt.

He was brutal and without remorse. "Heartless bastard" would certainly be a fitting moniker.

And that was precisely why—

"I need to have him working under me," Yuuto declared.

"What?! After meeting with him, you are *still* saying things like that?! Why, if you release him, he might very well immediately turn his sword against you again!"

"I'm willing to take that risk. I need him."

From this point forward, Yuuto was attempting to walk the path of military conquest. He couldn't afford to always do the "right" thing.

This man, Hveðrungr, could use his powers of observation to discern an enemy's vulnerability, come up with vicious and crafty plans Yuuto would never think of, and execute them without hesitation or remorse.

Considering what was coming, he was a resource that Yuuto absolutely needed on his side.

"I'm back!"

“Welcome back, Yuu-kun. Dinner’s ready!”

This day full of excitement, shock, and turmoil was finally at an end, and as Yuuto returned to his chambers, Mitsuki greeted him with a beaming smile.

Behind her, he could see white rice, salt-grilled salmon, miso soup, *dashimaki*-style rolled omelettes... all the staples of a pure traditional Japanese home-cooked meal, lined up on a table.

Yuuto felt a warmth rising in his chest.

“I come home after a long, hard day at work, and my wife’s here waiting for me with a smile and a delicious meal she made for me. I gotta say, I’m one lucky guy.”

“Hee hee, yeah, you are lucky, aren’t you!” Mitsuki’s reply was boastful, but she also sounded happy.

That was why it pained Yuuto a little to hear it, too.

“I’m sorry. A wonderful, hardworking wife like you didn’t deserve to be left alone on her wedding day.”

Yuuto was pretty ignorant when it came to the hearts of women, but even he understood that, to a woman, a wedding ceremony was an extremely important event.

On what was supposed to be the happiest day of their lives, it was completely inexcusable for the groom to spend the whole day aside from the ceremony occupied with work, leaving his bride all alone by herself.

“No, it’s okay, I understand. I mean, I don’t really know the details, but something really serious is going on right now, right?”

“Yeah. Honestly, it’s giving me a real headache,” Yuuto said with a sigh.

For now, his quick actions had prevented any further confusion and disorder domestically, but that didn’t change the fact that the Steel Clan was still in a really bad position.

And, it was easy to imagine that things would quickly worsen if the problem wasn’t dealt with soon.

Yuuto needed to do something, and it needed to happen fast.

“Against a vertical alliance, the most effective counter would be to break them with a horizontal alliance, at least according to theory...” Yuuto mumbled.

“Vertical? Horizontal?” Mitsuki tilted her head to the side, puzzled.

“Ah, sorry about that,” Yuuto said, chuckling to himself a bit. “That’s not really something to talk about on our wedding night either.”

Ordinarily, they should be spending tonight whispering sweet nothings into each others’ ears, but here he was bringing up violent topics.

“No, it’s okay. I’m sorry for not knowing more about this stuff.”

“No, you’re fine just how you are. In fact, it’s something I’m glad for.”

Yuuto’s time together with Mitsuki was the only time when he could be free from the overwhelming pressure of his role as Reginarch Suoh-Yuuto.

When he talked with her, he could forget about being a ruler of nations and go back to being just an ordinary young man from Japan. He could relax.

Yuuto was aware that recently he’d been pushing himself a little too hard. If he wasn’t able to spend this relaxing time with her anymore, it would probably be too much for his heart to handle. He’d end up crushed under the pressure.

“Yeah, I knew you’d say that.”

“You always do seem to know everything about me.”

“Well, I would; I’m your childhood friend. I’ve known you for as long as I can remember, Yuu-kun. ...And, I’ve always been paying attention to you and only you.”

“...Thank you.”

“That’s all?! Say it back, Yuu-kun! Tell me you’ve always been paying attention to me, too!”

“Y-You think I could say something that embarrassing?!”

“I said ‘say it,’ so say it! If you don’t, you’re not getting any dinner tonight!”

“What are you talking about, it’s sitting right there! You already made it for

me!”

“I’ll just eat it all myself! I’ve been able to eat a whole lot lately!”

Mitsuki sounded sure of herself.

It was indeed true that, lately, Mitsuki’s morning sickness seemed to have abated, and she was eating a lot more than before, possibly even more than Yuuto.

“And today’s rice was sent here directly from lárnvíðr! It’s the first crop of rice from the autumn harvest, as fresh as you can get. Guaranteed to be super delicious.”



“What?! R-Really?”

Yuuto could feel the saliva pouring into his mouth.

With a loud gulp, he swallowed.

“I’ve always been paying attention to you and only you.”

“You’re looking at the rice while you say it!”

“Well, yeah, can you blame me?! We’re talking about new crop rice here!”

Yuuto yelled back, unrepentant.

Back in Japan, the freshest new crop rice was only available for a limited time each year, and was more expensive. Yuuto hadn’t tasted new crop rice in over three years. It was so enticing that he couldn’t take his eyes off of it.

This sort of back-and-forth was just one more part of their relationship that was the same as always.

But, suddenly, Mitsuki stopped, and looked at Yuuto more seriously.

“...Hey, Yuu-kun. Are things really gonna be okay?”

As always, his childhood friend could tell when something was off.

Yuuto thought that since the imperial subjugation order had set everyone on edge, maybe she’d been picking up on the tension in the people around her.

That’s why he decided to be assertive and optimistic with her.

“Yeah, it’ll be fine. You don’t have anything to worry about.”

Mitsuki nodded. “...Okay. In that case, let’s eat!”

She once again broke out into a beautiful, innocent smile.

For some reason, that smile made a deep impression on Yuuto.

“And, so, I shall now commence this Oath of the Chalice Ceremony, a rite which shall bring these three clans, the Sword Clan, the Cloud Clan, and the Fang Clan, together in reconciliation, peace, harmony, and new friendship. I am Alexis, and I have been blessed with the high honor of serving as the mediator for this ceremony. I humbly beg that you might grant me your favor.”

The man's clear, powerful voice resounded through the otherwise still and solemn air of the hörgr, the sanctuary hall used for religious ceremonies.

Alexis was an imperial priest, a direct representative of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, and the role of mediator in a Chalice Ceremony between clans in this region most often fell to him.

The wavering flames of the nearby torches cast their reddish tinged light throughout the hall and onto the parties to the ceremony, who sat facing each other on either side of the altar, a partitioning screen dividing the space between them.

To the right of the altar sat the representatives from the Sword Clan; to the left, the Fang and Cloud Clans.

For the last twenty years, the Sword Clan had been involved in unending border disputes with the Fang and Cloud Clans, and so their relationship with each other was infamously terrible.

However, recently the divine empress had issued a subjugation order targeting the Steel Clan, and the patriarchs of the three clans had all come to the same decision: The Steel Clan's rapid rise in size and power was now a threat, and they could no longer afford to fight amongst each other. And so, they had met to negotiate a cease-fire agreement.

"Now, in accordance with the ceremony, we shall remove the partition which divides our three honored parties. Proceed!"

At Alexis' command, his subordinates grabbed the edges of the partitioning screen and lifted it, carrying it away.

The partition was a symbol, a physical metaphor for the friction and strife that had existed between the three clans. With that symbol removed, the patriarchs of the three clans were now face to face.

Instantly, everyone in that room was struck by the feeling that the air in the room had just grown much colder.

The Sword Clan patriarch, Fagrahvél.

The Cloud Clan patriarch, Gerhard.

The Fang Clan patriarch, Sígismund.

For many years now, the three of them had been at war with each other.

Each of them was the patriarch of a powerful nation in its own right, and they were lords who commanded dignity and exuded a fearful presence.

They stared each other down in silence, as if holding each other in check. The air in the sanctuary hall seemed electrified with the tension.

Even so, the ceremony continued on. A ceremonial Chalice was prepared for each patriarch, its contents checked for poison and then placed in front of its recipient.

“Now, if the three honorable lords will please take these Chalices into their hands.”

Alexis gestured, and the three patriarchs complied, taking the cups in hand and holding them up. He then confirmed that they each were ready.

“Know that the moment you drink from your Chalices, the many and various incidents of discord and strife between you in the past, the obstacles which divide you from each other, shall be at once removed, and you three shall be linked by a new bond: a bond of friendship and accord. Proceed!”

Simultaneously, the three patriarchs tilted back their cups and drank.

Alexis waited for them to finish drinking and return the empty cups to the small platform set in front of them. Then he raised his voice and addressed the whole room.

“I hereby announce to all who have gathered here in attendance: At this moment, the Oath of the Chalice of Reconciliation has been exchanged between these three parties, a vow which joins them in new friendship. In accordance with this, and in order that no new waves of discord would damage this new bond from this day forward, I shall humbly take possession of these sacred Chalices.”

With that, Alexis stood up and unfurled a large, pure-white cloth. He then approached each of the clan patriarchs and took their Chalice, gathering them up and placing them inside the cloth.

After collecting them all, he returned to his original position and slowly, reverently folded the cloth, wrapping the symbolic cups into a small bundle.

Once this was finished, Alexis took a deep breath, and addressed the room in his booming voice once more.

“With this, the Oath of the Chalice Ceremony is concluded. The Sword Clan, Cloud Clan, and Fang Clan are now joined by a bond of mutual friendship and accord. To all gathered here, I extend my congratulations!”

Everyone in the hörgr burst into loud applause.

At that moment, a new military alliance between the Sword, Cloud, and Fang Clans against the Steel Clan had been secured.

“Lord Fagrahvél, please wait!”

The ceremony had ended without incident, and Fagrahvél was making his way to the exit of the hörgr when someone called out to him from behind.

He recognized the voice, for it was a man he knew well.

“What do you need, Lord Alexis?” Fagrahvél asked, turning to face the priest.

He let neither his face nor his voice betray any emotion.

Alexis was, on the surface, an imperial representative who handled Chalice Ceremonies in the regions from Bifröst to Álfheimr. But in fact, he was one of the many “eyes” of Imperial High Priest Hárbarth.

In other words, he was a direct subordinate of the man Fagrahvél disliked most of all.

It was only natural that Fagrahvél would act coldly toward him.

“First, I wish to offer my congratulations and gratitude. I congratulate you on the success of today’s ceremony. And I wish to thank you for granting me the honor of serving as intermediary on such a momentous occasion, forging peace between three clans which had been in conflict for so long.”

“Hmph, *you’re* the one who convinced those two to agree to the cease-fire. It’s only right you’d perform the ceremony,” Fagrahvél replied curtly.

Indeed, the ceremony that had just taken place had only come into being because Alexis had personally visited the patriarch of each clan and negotiated in order to make it happen.

They'd been enemy nations since two generations of patriarch prior, and yet the priest had pulled off bringing both of them to the table in such a short time.

And it wasn't just the two of them, either.

"You are quite impressive. After all, you didn't just manage to get cooperation from the Cloud and Fang Clans, you were able to pull in the Hoof, Panther, and Lightning Clans as well."

Fagrahvél didn't take pleasure in complimenting someone working for his political enemy, Hárbarth, but in this matter at least, he had to give Alexis credit where it was due.

Now all of the clans that shared borders with the Steel Clan were working together. And the Sword Clan, one of the pillars of the alliance, was also one of the Ten Great Clans.

It didn't matter how strong the Steel Clan was; they would be completely outnumbered.

"It is all entirely thanks to the holy guidance of Her Majesty the þjóðann. That, and perhaps thanks to the fact that everyone felt the threat posed by the Steel Clan's rapid expansion."

"Hmph. You know, an excess of humility is arrogance in its own right," Fagrahvél replied.

It was true that the reason Alexis gave would have played a large part.

However, he'd still cajoled five different clans into this alliance in this short amount of time. That wasn't something just anyone could do.

There was something mysterious about this man, just like there was with his superior, Hárbarth.

Alexis played off the remark with a chuckle. "Ha ha, you are quite harsh. Those are my honest feelings, I assure you."

"I've no intention of playing mind games with you," Fagrahvél shot back. "I'd

like you to get to the *real* main subject. Surely you didn't actually approach me just to give me congratulations and thanks?"

"Oh, that's right. I have something to give to you, from Her Majesty."

Alexis fished around in the leather sack tied to his waist, then pulled out a clay tablet.

"Ngh! You should have said that earlier!"

Fagrahvél grabbed the tablet and wrenched it roughly from Alexis' hands, then quickly read it.

It was a short missive telling him to become the leader of the new multi-clan military alliance, and to lead all of the armies to battle against the Steel Clan with due haste.

It was unlike anything the Sigrdrífa that Fagrahvél knew would ever write.

However, it was sealed with the special imperial seal that only the þjóðann was permitted to use.

It was the secretaries who actually etched the symbols on the clay for messages, and they would be able to spot anything wrong.

It was safe to assume that this was a message she had sent out herself.

The truth was that, until now, Fagrahvél hadn't been entirely convinced that it was truly a good idea to try attacking the Steel clan.

However, he couldn't afford to think that way anymore.

This was a direct order from the divine empress herself.

Fagrahvél held up the clay tablet in both hands, and declared aloud:

"...As you command, Your Majesty. I will destroy the Steel Clan, without fail!"

ACT 2

“It turned out to be quite the *exciting* wedding, didn’t it? Though, I suppose one could say that nothing could be more fitting for the greatest hero of these turbulent times. Now, Princess, you’ll be up next, I’m sure!”

It was the day after Yuuto and Mitsuki’s wedding ceremony, and Linnea had been spending a short break from work enjoying a bit of tea and pleasant conversation with her assistant second-in-command, Haugspori, when he suddenly hit her with this bombshell completely out of the blue.

Linnea was so taken aback that her tea went down the wrong pipe, and she sputtered and coughed loudly.

After a few moments, her coughing abated, and she fixed Haugspori with a reproachful glare.

“Where did that come from?! You *do* understand the situation we’re in right now, don’t you?”

“I certainly do,” Haugspori replied calmly, not perturbed in the slightest by his patriarch’s angry tone. “According to the lord reginarch, we are facing a war far greater than any we’ve fought before.”

Haugspori was an Einherjar of the rune Ljósálfar, the Light Elves, and the Horn Clan’s strongest general. Linnea trusted him completely, so naturally, she had filled him in on last night’s war council meeting.

“That is precisely *why* I brought this up to you.”

“Hm?”

“Once the conflict is underway, the reginarch will be obliged to travel from location to location, to meet the enemy in battle, whereas you will surely be assigned to provide logistical support from here in Gimlé. Naturally, you’ll have very few opportunities to see him after that.”

“Hmm...” Linnea found herself unable to disagree. It made sense to her.

In fact, last year, Yuuto had only been present in the clan capital of Gimlé (and in lárnvíðr, before that) for about two-thirds of the time.

And he'd been here for less than half of this year so far, though that was also because he'd been forcibly transported back to his country of origin beyond the heavens for several months.

Judging by the current circumstances, it was almost certain he'd be spending even more time out of the city, with little to no chance of the opposite.

Faced with this belated realization of the obvious, Linnea was left speechless.

"Princess, if you don't take care of things now, before that happens, you might find that several full years have slipped away from you without you even realizing it."

"Nnngh...!" Grimacing, Linnea failed to stifle a pained groan.

She'd become seventeen this year.

In Yggdrasil, it wasn't unusual to get married sometime around age fifteen, so she was already somewhat "behind" for her generation. She couldn't afford to take it easy and put things off for several more years.

"Fortunately, Lady Mitsuki has said she will allow her husband to take concubines, and she even told you directly that she wished for you to support the lord reginarch. There should be no obstacles standing in your way."

"Yes, it's true that Big Sister Mitsuki *did* say that to me."

Linnea thought back to that moment and sighed, remembering the admiration she felt.

Mitsuki had told Linnea that, in Yuuto's new role as reginarch, he now shouldered far too heavy a burden for one man to bear... and that Mitsuki alone would not be enough to help him shoulder it.

Mitsuki was a woman like any other. There was no doubt that she would prefer to have Yuuto all to herself if she could.

And yet she had refused to be bound by natural human jealousy, placing more importance on how she could best support her husband in both body and mind as he dealt with his weighty responsibilities.

Linnea had been overcome with admiration for that inspirational attitude. She felt like it was no wonder Yuuto had chosen this woman to be his only wedded partner for life.

And, that was the source of her greatest obstacle.

“However, Father is devoted to Big Sister Mitsuki, and her alone, even though he’s surrounded by other beautiful women like Aunt Felicia and Sigrún. Someone like me would never even...” Putting it into words herself like this made her feel miserable.

Born as the daughter of a patriarch, she had grown up eating well and learning to care for her appearance.

In her own opinion, she believed herself to be at least modestly beautiful, but she felt like she could never match up to those two silver-and gold-haired pillars of beauty always at Yuuto’s side.

If even the two of them had failed to capture his heart, then what hope did she have?

“Well,” Haugspori responded, “setting Aunt Sigrún aside for the moment, I know that Great Aunt Felicia and Lord Yuuto are already in an intimate relationship.”

“Hwuh?!” Linnea blurted out, practically dumbstruck.

This was completely out of nowhere for her, something she never would have imagined.

“Wh-Wh-What are you talking about?!” she shouted.

Haugspori looked puzzled. “I’m not sure why you are asking me that. You can tell just by looking at them, can’t you?”

“N-No, I can’t, and that’s why I’m asking you!”

Haugspori let out a long, exasperated-sounding sigh.

Linnea, of course, felt her temper rise at this.

In Yggdrasil, the Oath of the Chalice was absolute, and the authority and status of a sworn parent was absolute as well. As Haugspori’s sworn parent,

Linnea couldn't help but feel offended by his terribly rude behavior just now.

However, her curiosity was stronger. She swallowed her anger and waited for him to explain.

Haugspori shook his head as if to say *good grief*, then continued. "In that case, I would suggest that you pay close attention to Great Aunt Felicia the next time you see her. Watch her movements, and the way she carries herself. She has always been an alluring woman, but now her mannerisms are noticeably even more feminine than before."

"Hm. A-Actually, I got that sense from her as well."

"Right? It's evident even in the way she looks at Lord Yuuto. In the past, her gaze burned with a fiery passion, but now it is full of *warmth*, as if softly embracing him. Just by looking at that difference, there's no mistaking that something changed between them."

"Ngh... But, you haven't heard Father or Aunt Felicia mention anything about it directly, though, right?"

"Well, they wouldn't. Normally, one's most intimate moments in the bedroom aren't something to discuss with other people."

"S-So, in other words, these are all just assumptions you've made, based on..."

"Ha ha ha! Princess, consider who you are talking with right now." Cutting Linnea off with a laugh, Haugspori pointed a thumb at himself.

As the Horn Clan's greatest archer, his arrows could fell even a bird soaring high in the sky with perfect accuracy, and this mastery with the bow had earned him fame throughout the entire Steel Clan. He was just as equally regarded for his prowess with the opposite sex, and it was said that any woman he set his sights on soon fell into his bed.

He had vast experience when it came to the ins and outs of romantic relationships, and that lent his words a certain weight on their own. Even without more solid evidence to back them up, Linnea couldn't simply dismiss them as nonsense.

She gulped nervously. “If that’s true, then I can’t just sit around hesitating, either.”

“But still, what am I supposed to *do*, exactly?”

An hour had passed, and Linnea was still sitting in her office with her head in her hands, hesitating.

It’s said the best day to follow through on plans is the day you make them, but in Linnea’s case, she had already formally proposed marriage to Yuuto one year ago and had been rejected.

Even going to confess her feelings to him anew felt wrong on the day immediately after his wedding. It just felt too unprincipled.

“...Argh! I won’t accomplish anything just sitting around here! I’ve got things that need reporting to Father anyway, so I’m just going to go and see him!”

Linnea grabbed a stack of papers from on top of her desk and stood up.

“Ohh, going to ‘scout out the enemy,’ I see!” Haugspori said in an excited tone.

“That’s right,” Linnea replied. “After all, ‘Know your enemy and know yourself, and you can fight a hundred battles without disaster.’”

It was a quote she’d learned from Yuuto, originally by someone called Sun Tzu.

In the end, what she’d learned about Yuuto and Felicia’s relationship from Haugspori was nothing more than his own account of things.

It wasn’t that she didn’t trust what he said, but this was something she wanted to confirm with her own eyes.

Rushing into things based on a misunderstanding would only wind up hurting her more, so she was at least going to avoid that.

“Take care, Princess, and good hunting.”

“Thanks.”

Linnea replied to Haugspori’s spirited sendoff with a single nod and set off for

Yuuto's office.

His office was the next room over, so it was a short trip.

"Father, I've brought some documents outlining the yield from this year's autumn harvest," Linnea announced, opening the door.

The owner of this office had only passed one night since his wedding ceremony, yet here he was at his desk, staring holes into a map and frowning.

He must have truly been locked in intense concentration, for he didn't even notice Linnea entering the room.

"Big Brother, Lady Linnea is here to see you." Felicia tapped Yuuto lightly on the shoulder, and he looked up with a start.

"Hm? O-Oh, sorry! Didn't hear you come in. What did you need?" Yuuto greeted Linnea with a welcoming smile.

It looked just a bit clumsy and forced.

Linnea didn't have to wonder why. He was surely racking his brain over how to deal with the situation caused by the imperial subjugation order against the Steel Clan.

"I've brought some documents outlining the yield from this year's autumn harvest," she repeated, handing over the bundle of papers she was carrying.

"There were losses at the beginning of spring this year, when the Panther and Lightning Clan troops damaged and pillaged our farmlands, but despite that, this year's harvest still far exceeded last year's."

"Oh, really? I'm glad to hear that. You can't fight a war on an empty stomach, as they say."

"So, we will be going to war, then?" Linnea asked, her brow furrowing a little.

Honestly, Linnea had been wishing that for a little while the Steel Clan could focus purely on improving their domestic stability and production.

The former Panther Clan territories they'd captured were still heavily damaged from the last conflict. If she could teach the Norfolk crop rotation system to the other subsidiary clan patriarchs, overall food production within

the Steel Clan as a whole could more than double.

A nation with plenty of food and a healthy economy naturally attracts immigrants from surrounding countries, increasing its overall population.

Given just a few years to bide their time, the Steel Clan would have grown to become larger and more powerful than all of the surrounding nations combined.

There was no doubt about that, which was why the subjugation order was such a terrible development.

“They’re probably going to make their move before the end of this year,” Yuuto muttered, returning his gaze to the map on his desk. “Though, even if they don’t, I intend to start things myself.”

There was a hint of something desperate and sad in his expression.

Linnea was originally from a different clan than Yuuto, so she hadn’t spent as much time with him as some of the other people close to him. Even so, she felt something was off, like she’d never seen him looking this troubled before.

“Father, I may not be dependable enough to solve the problems you are facing, but you can always speak to me about what’s troubling you.”

“Mm, yeah, you’re right. Actually, this is perfect timing. I’d like to ask your opinion on this, too.”

“Of course!”

Linnea replied immediately, the joy clear in her voice. That the man she loved and respected so much would rely on her, even just a little bit, was something that filled her with happiness and pride.

“Take a look at this for me.” Yuuto gestured to the map on his desk.

“This is a map of our region, correct?”

“Right. Currently, our Steel Clan shares its border with five surrounding clans: the Fang, Cloud, Panther, Hoof, and Lightning Clans.”

One by one, Yuuto indicated each of them on the map with his finger before continuing.

“As I mentioned in the council meeting last night, because of the imperial subjugation order against us, I believe that it’s highly likely that they’re going to come together through a military alliance, and then all attack us at the same time.”

“...Right.” Linnea nodded slowly, processing the weight behind what Yuuto was saying.

Hearing that information again while looking at the map, it was even more apparent just how bad this situation was going to be if Yuuto’s predictions were correct (and Linnea was convinced that Yuuto’s predictions were always correct).

Each of the five outside nations was on par with or greater in strength than Linnea’s own Horn Clan.

The Steel Clan had the combined strengths of its seven-member clans, but aside from the Wolf Clan and Horn Clan, individually they were all small and militarily weak. And since the enemy nations completely surrounded them on all sides, it clearly put them at a strategic disadvantage as well.

“So, my thought is that I could try and punch a hole in their coalition. If I could isolate even a single one of those clans and pull them into an alliance with us, then just like a river dam or a defensive line on the battlefield, once a hole has been made, it becomes possible to bring the whole thing crumbling down in a chain reaction.”

“O-Oh...” Linnea was so stunned, she could only give that vague reply and nod in response.

As far as Linnea had learned through her own research, in the history of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, an imperial subjugation order had only been issued once before: over two hundred years ago, when the first divine emperor Wotan personally led a campaign to conquer the Jötunheimr region.

Since then, the empire had fallen into decline, and the situation now was completely different from back then.

Yet despite that, Yuuto had been able to look ahead and predict how events were likely going to play out, *almost as if he’d already seen them occur before*,

and then plan countermeasures ahead of time based on those predictions.

And furthermore, every one of those plans made logical sense.

She'd felt it at the patriarch council meeting the night before, but once again Linnea found herself simply astonished at Yuuto's powers of foresight.

Yuuto leaned his chin on one hand and sighed. "Of course, the problem, then, is that any one of those clans is going to be a tough nut to crack."

Linnea immediately understood what he meant.

"That is true. For one, I can't imagine that berserker Steinþórr has any desire to make peace with us at this point. The Hoof Clan still bears a deep grudge against us for killing their previous patriarch, Yngvi. As for the remnants of the Panther Clan to the north, they have even more to detest us for than merely killing huge numbers of their brethren in battle. We used their captured leaders as justification for installing our own usurper patriarch to rule over the prisoners of war we recruited, stealing their proud Panther Clan name to use for one of our own clans."

Those clans all had deeply personal or emotional issues with the Steel Clan at this point, so trying to establish friendly relations with them wasn't going to meet with any acceptance.

"That would leave the clans to the east," Linnea continued. "However, this time, we have the opposite problem. We haven't had much contact or diplomatic relations with either of them. It would be one thing if we had already developed friendly relations or had some sort of mutual interest, but without either of those, they wouldn't have any motivation to willingly side with enemies of the empire."

Indeed, from the perspective of those clans, being seen as aiding enemies of the empire could lead to an imperial subjugation order being brought against themselves as well.

That would be the starting point from which they'd have to try to negotiate an alliance. They wouldn't be starting from zero; they'd be starting from *below* zero.

There was still more hope of success than with any of the three western clans,

but she could picture just how incredibly difficult it would be to negotiate anything.

“Of course, I do recommend continuing to press for negotiations with those two, but in my humble opinion it might be best for us to put our main focus not on the five surrounding clans, but on one particular power further to our south.”

“Oh?” Yuuto’s eyes widened in interest.

“The superpower of the southern lands, the Flame Clan, shares the Lightning Clan with us as a common enemy, and their national interests align with ours. Additionally, we have used Ginnar as our representative to deliver multiple gifts to them, and we responded to their recent request to send soldiers as aid, which has built up a foundation for friendly relations. I think our greatest prospects for making an alliance and swearing the Oath of the Sibling Chalice are with them.”

“Furthermore, if the Flame Clan and the Steel Clan were able to form a strong alliance, several other smaller regional powers would likely approach us, concluding that it’s in their better interest to side with us rather than against us. Also, the citizens residing in our territories will soon learn about the imperial subjugation order, and such a strong alliance would go a long way toward dispelling their anxiety.”

Yuuto listened to Linnea’s explanation intently, nodding strongly, as if she’d said exactly what he was hoping to hear.

“Yeah, that’s just what I was thinking, too. I really should focus on the Flame Clan, then.”

Linnea breathed a sigh of relief upon hearing Yuuto’s agreement. The last thing she’d wanted was to give an opinion that was off the mark and make him disappointed in her.

“Oh, my... you are so truly impressive, Lady Linnea.” Standing at Yuuto’s side, Felicia let out a long, admiring sigh.

Linnea shook her head. “Not at all, I still have a long way to go. If not for Father’s explanation of the situation and his plan, my mind would have been

too caught up in the vague, overall concern around our status as enemies of the empire, too clouded by that to think properly.”

She wasn’t saying this to be humble, but because it was honestly how she felt.

Technically, since Linnea was the second-in-command of the Steel Clan, she would have to take over his duties as reginarch if something were to happen to him. Just thinking of what that situation would be like made her shudder.

Eventually, she might have been able to come to the same sort of conclusions that Yuuto had, but at the very least, she could never do so with the sort of rapid speed that he could.

In times of crisis, what was most vital was the speed of one’s initial response. Going by her assessment of herself, Linnea was sure that in this situation she would have been a step too slow in choosing each of her responses, locking herself into a pattern where she’d watch the situation steadily worsen as she became more and more powerless to do anything to stop it.

“Lady Linnea, if you have a long way to go, then I am useless to begin with,” Felicia replied. “As you gave your explanation, all I could do was nod and think, *oh, that’s true*, agreeing after the fact. Perhaps it is because you were born and raised to be a patriarch. I find myself terribly envious of your ability to see the bigger picture of things.”

“It’s true,” Yuuto chimed in. “Linnea, you’re the only one I can really discuss these sorts of issues with. We share an understanding as fellow patriarchs.”

“...!”

Ba-dump. Linnea felt her heart pound loudly in her chest.

She once again recalled what Mitsuki had said to her before.

“As a patriarch, you would be far better than I would at seeing things from Yuu-kun’s perspective, understanding what troubles him, and supporting him the way he needs.”

At the same time, she also recalled that Mitsuki had mentioned she’d noticed something off about Yuuto, as if he were burdened by some sort of “tragic resolve.”

Back then, that comment hadn't matched anything she'd seen in him, but now she felt like she understood it a little.

There was something about the way he'd looked just a moment ago, when he'd said: *"They're probably going to make their move before the end of this year. Though, even if they don't, I intend to start things myself."*

It was a very aggressive, warlike attitude for Yuuto. And Linnea had sensed an odd impatience from him, like something else entirely was bearing down on him.

"Father!" Gathering her resolve, Linnea raised her voice and stepped in closer to Yuuto.

"Wh-What is it?" Surprised by this sudden intensity from Linnea, Yuuto flinched and pulled back a bit.

Linnea, however, kept up the pressure. "Tell me, is there another matter that has been deeply troubling you, aside from the imperial subjugation order?"

"Wha?!" Yuuto's expression froze solid, as if she'd seen right through him.

Felicia's eyes widened slightly. It seemed Linnea's question had struck a chord with something Felicia had already suspected as well.

"If it is something that you cannot even discuss with Big Sister Mitsuki, your own wife, then I know it must be something terrible indeed, but please do not carry such a heavy burden alone. Even though I may not be able to take it from you, I humbly ask that you would share it with me."

"Big Brother, I beg the same of you as well. You seem so incredibly tense as of late, and I am terribly worried for you."

"...Going off of what you both just said, I'm guessing this means Mitsuki's already noticed it too?" Yuuto asked, an incredibly uncomfortable look on his face. Linnea and Felicia both nodded gravely.

Yuuto took a deep breath and then let out a long, heavy sigh. "Looks like I've got a long way to go, too. I was trying not to give her more to be afraid of when she's still in the middle of her pregnancy."

Linnea gulped nervously. In other words, the matter Yuuto was keeping to

himself was shocking or terrifying enough to be *dangerous to Mitsuki's pregnancy*.

"Please tell me, Father," she asked again. "What is it that's happened?"

"..." Yuuto remained silent.

It looked as if he were still stuck trying to decide whether he should really tell them or not.

It was rare to see Yuuto, someone so skilled at decision-making, unable to make up his mind for this long.

At this rate, it didn't seem like Linnea would get an answer. She glanced over at Felicia.

"Aunt Felicia, could you leave the room?"

"Erm..." Felicia paused for just a moment, exchanged glances with Linnea, then nodded and replied, "Of course, I understand." She herself surely wanted to know the truth just as badly, but her decision was swift.

"I'm sorry," Linnea said.

"...No, it is all right. I leave Big Brother in your hands." Felicia gave a small bow and left the office.

After watching her leave and waiting for the door to close behind her, Linnea turned to Yuuto, placing a hand solemnly on her chest.

"Father, I am the second-in-command of the Steel Clan. While it is loath to imagine the unthinkable happening to you, in such an event I am bound to succeed you as the reginarch, to inherit and carry on your will and principles. Of course, I understand that I am still lacking in many respects..."

"No, that's not true at..." Yuuto tried to interject and argue that last part, but Linnea cut him off again before he could even finish.

"But even so! Preparing for the worst-case scenario is one of the most important duties of a patriarch. Even if it's something you cannot speak about with anyone else, the more serious the issue, the more I have a right, an *obligation*, even, to know about it!"

Linnea spoke all of this without pause, her eyes gleaming with the light of her firm resolve and staring right into Yuuto's.

Whatever the matter was, it was something that had managed to upset Yuuto to the point of impatience when even an imperial subjugation order had not frightened him or broken his composure. It was something that worried him enough to make him *hide it*.

It was surely something terrible enough to make the subjugation order pale by comparison.

Even so, Linnea could not back down now.

Mitsuki had told Linnea that she would entrust the care of Yuuto in his role as reginarch to her. That was all the more reason she couldn't let him deal with this alone.

"...Yeah. You're right. You're right, of course. I should still tell you, at least. I have to, just in case."

"Ah! Then...?!" Linnea leaned forward eagerly, prompting Yuuto to respond with a faint smile.

"Yeah, I'll tell you. But don't blame me afterwards if you wish I hadn't told you."

"No... that can't be... How...?!"

Linnea could only shout in abject disbelief.

Yuuto's account of her world's future fate was simply far too nonsensical.

She felt that way despite the fact that she had complete faith in Yuuto, a blind faith that was almost religious in nature.

On the other hand, she knew for a fact that Yuuto wasn't the kind of person who would lie about something like this.

She now understood just why he'd had so much trouble deciding whether or not he should tell her about this.

This was definitely not something he could let go public.

If information about this got out and spread, it would cause unfathomable anxiety to spread throughout the populace. In the worst case, people driven to despair might lash out in mindless violence.

“Yggdrasil will sink into the ocean?!” Linnea repeated, still incredulous.

“That’s right. Not as soon as any day now, of course, but in the fairly near future, it absolutely will.”

“Father, it’s not as if I doubt your words, but...”

“Don’t worry, I don’t expect you to believe me right away, either. But in the world I’m from, it’s something that’s already confirmed to have happened.”

Yuuto grimaced, as if it pained him to say that last part.

His expression didn’t give Linnea the impression that he was lying.

“...You did mention that the world you came from existed many thousands of years in the future of our world, didn’t you?”

Yuuto nodded. “I did. And in my world, or I guess I should say, in the *era* that I came from, this land of Yggdrasil doesn’t exist anymore.”

Linnea said nothing, and for a moment the room was held in a heavy, oppressive silence.

To Linnea, this land she’d grown up in was something constant and eternal, something that had always been here since from long before she was born. She had always looked out and seen the land stretching out endlessly as far as she could see, all the way to the horizons—no, stretching even beyond them.

And that was all supposed to sink into the ocean, leaving not a single trace behind?

It was as absurd an idea as the sun rising in the west and sinking in the east.

Still, if Yuuto was asserting this claim with so much confidence, it had to be because he had enough evidence to convince himself of it.

“...Th-Then what are we supposed to do?” Linnea asked weakly.

People were powerless in the face of the unstoppable force of a natural disaster.

If they knew beforehand that this cataclysm was coming, then they had no choice but to try to evacuate, but if all of Yggdrasil itself was doomed to sink, where could they even flee to?

“Right now I’m having Ingrid make a prototype sailing ship. I’ll mass-produce those, and then we’ll use them to escape Yggdrasil. I intend to take all of our citizens with us, and move us all to another continent.”

“Another... continent?” Linnea repeated back, stunned. “Such a thing exists?!”

There were continents aside from Yggdrasil.

Until now, it was something she never would have thought.

That, however, was not particularly unusual for someone living in her era.

During the same time period in ancient Mesopotamia, Sargon of Akkad gave himself the title “King of the Universe.” As for the Europeans, until the seafaring Age of Discovery, their concept of the entire world extended only to adjacent portions of the Eurasian and African continents, meaning their world only had one, contiguous landmass. The American Australian continents didn’t *exist* to them.

Thus, Linnea’s assumption that Yggdrasil was the only existing landmass in the world wasn’t an unreasonable one.

“It exists,” Yuuto said. “Several of them. Europe should be across the sea to Yggdrasil’s east, and the American continent to the west.”

“W-Wait just a moment, please!” Linnea shouted in confusion, her voice nearly going shrill.

The idea of Yggdrasil sinking into the ocean was already earth-shattering enough on its own, but the fact that there were other landmasses beyond the outer seas was enough to disrupt her concept of the structure of the very world itself.

Her mind simply couldn’t keep up with this.

She took a series of long, deep breaths. After about ten of those, she finally felt like she was calming down.

“If I’m being honest, Father, there are several parts of this that I don’t really understand, but I do at least understand why it must have given you a sense of desperation, and why you could not tell Big Sister Mitsuki.”

“Haha, I feel sorry for unloading it on you, but I have to say it does feel like opening up about it to you took a little bit of the weight off of my shoulders.”

“No, I’m glad you told me,” Linnea said, without any hesitation. “It is true that the very thought that this land will sink into the sea terrifies me. But that is still far better to me than allowing you to suffer with this knowledge alone. I may not be able to take the burden away from you, but please at least let me do whatever I can to make it lighter for you.”

“...Thanks.” Yuuto took a long, deep breath, and then slumped down against the back of his chair.

It was as if the sudden relief he felt had also let all the strength out of his body.

If something wasn’t done, then hundreds of thousands of human lives would be lost beneath the waves of the sea. Even if Yuuto was the greatest hero and ruler this generation had ever seen, it was still too heavy a responsibility for him to try to carry on his own.

“Still, this plan to transport all of our people to this other landmass across the sea... what an unbelievably huge undertaking.”

It was easy enough to put the concept into words, but the task itself would be unfathomably difficult to execute.

The Steel Clan alone had a population in the tens of thousands. Transplanting them all would require an enormous number of ships, even if one used multiple trips to try and reduce the amount that would need to be built.

They would also need enough food stores to temporarily support the survival of all of those people at their destination.

Just doing the basic calculations in her head made Linnea start to feel dizzy.

“Geographically speaking, are we going to be heading west to this ‘America’ landmass, then?” she asked.

The Steel Clan had already secured the westernmost lands of the Álfheimr region, including several ports along the western coast.

By contrast, reaching the eastern sea coast would require crossing through the Bifröst and Ásgarðr regions, then eventually through the eastern region of Jötunheimr.

Thinking of it from that angle, it would seem that America was the only choice.

“No,” Yuuto said. “That can be our last resort, but right now I plan on heading for Europe.” It seemed as if he was going off of a completely different logic.

“May I ask for the reason why?”

“This is something I’m planning to test and confirm at some point, but Yggdrasil is probably pretty close to Europe. In Plato’s *Timaeus*, he writes that there was both trade and war between the peoples of Atlantis and Europe.”

“Um, what is this ‘Atlantis’?”

“It’s a name that refers to the Holy Ásgarðr Empire. In your language, the name Ásgarðr means ‘the land of the gods,’ right?”

Linnea nodded. “Yes, that’s correct.”

According to the myths of her people, the land of Yggdrasil was formed from the corpse of Ymir, the first Giant, whose full name was “Aurgelmir.”

When the empire was founded, the name Ásgarðr was then derived from that.

Yuuto continued. “The name ‘Atlantis’ means ‘the island of Atlas.’ In this case, ‘island’ means any landmass surrounded by water, even a continent. Plato’s people, the Greeks, worshiped a pantheon of gods who lived in Olympus, and Atlas is the name of one of the greater Titans, a race of gods who were the enemies of the Olympians. In other words, to the Greeks, Atlantis was ‘the land of the other gods.’ You see how the meanings line up?”

“I see...”

“Well, we got a little sidetracked there, but the point is that over on the American continent, there isn’t anything in the language that links to Yggdrasil.

Even three thousand years in the future, the people there still didn't have wheeled vehicles yet. From that we can conclude that there was never any cultural contact between you and them."

"The eastern lands of the realm are too far away, so I don't have any information from there," Linnea said, furrowing her brow. "But, it's certainly true that I have never heard of any landmass out to the west."

As part of Linnea's duty to gather information, she often learned of foreign lands and their affairs from the stories of traders and traveling merchants, but she had never once heard of a western continent.

And, as part of her education as a patriarch's daughter, she had learned all about the gods and myths of the Álfheimr region. She'd perfectly memorized all of it, and, again, there was not a single line written or sung about an entire other landmass beyond the western sea.

In other words, it must be so far away that they'd had absolutely zero contact.

"I'm having Ingrid do her best to work on this project, but even for someone like her, I honestly think it's going to be too hard for us to build ships that can make a long-term voyage across the ocean to the west. I did give her some schematics for ships like that, but they'd require a lot of different technologies that we just don't have enough experience with, yet."

"So it's like how it was with the refining of iron and the making of glasswares, then."

"Right. Just having the knowledge on paper isn't enough to be able to produce something."

When Yuuto first introduced the knowledge of making refined iron and glass, nobody could successfully make either of them right away. Both projects took six long months of trial and error before they could reliably make the finished product.

"In other words, you are saying that if we want to safely transport a large number of people out of Yggdrasil to a new land, we have no choice but to head to the eastern coast..."

"That's what I'm saying. Well, if things start to go bad, and we don't have the

time to take that option anymore, I'm willing to take the risk and set out west for America."

Linnea gave Yuuto a puzzled look. "By that phrasing, does that mean that you know of some indicator or sign of when the end approaches?"

"According to the *Timaeus*, the land sinks into the sea after a series of several very powerful earthquakes."

"Powerful earthquakes?" Linnea let out a long sigh. "That's a relief to hear," she said, relaxing a little.

At the very least since the time Linnea became a patriarch, she hadn't received a single report of any earthquakes.

"Even so, the fact remains that we don't have much time left. I'm still planning to march on the imperial capital Glaðsheimr by the end of this year."

"...!" Linnea's breath caught in her throat, and she turned to stare at Yuuto in shock.

There were already only three months left in the year.

And right now, the Steel Clan was still stuck right in the middle of the situation caused by the imperial subjugation order, with a war of unprecedented scale fast approaching them.

They would be using all of their resources just to try and deal with this situation, so the idea of pushing their armies into the central empire and all the way to Glaðsheimr just didn't seem realistic.

But Linnea saw in Yuuto's eyes that he was deadly serious, and meant exactly what he'd said.

In that case, there was only one course of action for Linnea to take now...

"You can't just tell me something like that *now*!"

...And that was to lecture him.

Frankly speaking, Linnea was a little angry at him.

She'd wanted for him to have trusted her more, to have depended on her more.

“First of all, if we’re planning for the mass migration of our people to a new land *and* the invasion of Glaðsheimr *at the same time*, we’ll need to prepare a truly considerable supply of food. That’s despite the fact that until just a while ago, we were wracked by food *shortages*! How did you even think you would secure enough food?!”

“Uhh... um, we increased our number of livestock thanks to the Norfolk system, so I thought maybe we could slaughter them all and turn them into dried meat rations.”

“That is naïve! That would not *nearly* be enough. You also need to consider using forced consecutive planting.”

In agriculture, planting the same crops in the same fields year after year will drain the soil of its nutrients, wearing it out, a phenomenon known as repeated cultivation damage.

If one were looking at cultivating an area of land over the long term, on a scale of tens of years or hundreds of years, that was something that needed to be avoided at all costs. But if the land were going to be abandoned completely in the next few years, it was a completely different story.

They could ignore the four-crop rotation system and plant four times the normal amount of food crops in all fields consecutively. If it was just for the short span of one or two years, that would absolutely provide a dramatically increased yield.

“And we’ll need to prioritize only food crops that we can preserve for a long time after the harvest. That’s going to be *very* difficult to get the populace to accept, but I will manage it somehow.”

“Y-Yeah, I’m counting on you.”

“As I am sure you know, the preparations for generating all of that food aren’t something that can be accomplished overnight! More than anything, *time* is necessary! If you had just told me about all of this even one month sooner, this would have required *entirely* less effort and trouble, you know!”

Even Linnea couldn’t help but press that point sharply against Yuuto a bit.

After all, the autumn harvest had ended, and the people were already in the

middle of preparations for the next planting. There really was no time left.

With the economic difficulties surrounding the harvest festival celebration finally settled and behind her, Linnea had originally been counting on being able to take it easy for just a little while, but now she would most certainly be spending every single day hounded by crucial and urgent work.

“S-Sorry.” The great hero-king Yuuto found himself overwhelmed by Linnea’s intensity, inching slowly backwards.

Linnea ignored this and slammed her palms against his desk, pushing in even closer.

“I know I am repeating myself here, but you should have at least told *me* about all of this sooner! If you had done that, our plans could have been more efficient, and we would have been able to make some stages of the preparations in secret!”

Linnea’s lecture continued. It was another full hour before she was finished.

When Linnea returned to her office, Haugspori was there waiting for her.

“Welcome back. How did things go?” he inquired, keenly interested.

Linnea nodded, returning his greeting. “Well, things are definitely going to get busier from now on! We’ve got a lot of hard work ahead of us!” She was practically bursting with excitement.

She had been berating Yuuto up and down for over an hour, but inwardly she’d been trembling from how *moving* the whole revelation was.

Yggdrasil would sink into the sea, and that was shocking—terrifying, even. But it was also a fact that without Yuuto here, millions of lives would have been surely doomed to be swallowed beneath the waves as well.

At this point, Linnea believed without a shadow of a doubt that Yuuto had been sent by the spirit of the divine giant Ymir to save the people of Yggdrasil.

She had received the honor of swearing the Oath of the Chalice with him. She had been blessed with the opportunity to assist him in his great and noble works. Her heart had every reason to dance with excitement.

Haugspori sighed. “...Is that so?” In direct contrast to Linnea, he sounded

dispirited, and half-heartedly scratched the back of his head with one hand.

“What is that reaction for?” Linnea asked indignantly, pursing her lips.

Naturally, the sinking of Yggdrasil was something she couldn’t share with him, but it still felt upsetting to get such a disappointed reaction when she was so full of passion and purpose.

“Well, I just couldn’t help thinking to myself, ‘Oh, I bet she got way too wrapped up in talking about work, and so the conversation never moved in a more romantic direction.’”

“...Uh.” That sound was all that escaped Linnea’s lips.

It was only now that she recalled that going to speak to Yuuto about work was supposed to have been nothing more than a valid excuse to go see him, to learn firsthand of his current relationship with Felicia.

“So, allow me to ask again,” Haugspori said. “How did things go?”

“Well, um...”

Haugspori let out a long, weary, exaggerated sigh that could more suitably be called a groan.

This was humiliating.

“How did you manage to mess that up, Princess?”

“W-We got into a *very* serious and important discussion, so there was no time to bring that up!”

“Hmm, I can certainly picture it,” Haugspori mused. “And I can picture the same thing happening from here on, as well; all of your conversations being about nothing but work.”

“Ngh!” Linnea realized she could clearly imagine that future too.

“Honestly, Princess, you are just far too serious for your own good...”
Haugspori stated, exasperated, but then it hit him. “Hm, perhaps then if you wish to discuss romance with him, it would be best to avoid using work as the justification for your meeting, and try to approach him during a break instead.”

“O-Oh, that’s a great idea! I think that would fit with my personality better,

too.”

The duties of a patriarch were such that a mistaken decision, or even delay in granting an approval, could end up causing harm to many people.

Tasked with such a heavy responsibility, Linnea viewed not giving full attention to her job as an insult to the position and to her people.

If she was dealing with work, then she wanted to focus *only* on work.

With Yuuto striving so earnestly to secure the future of the Steel Clan, she felt a resistance to interrupting that for such frivolous reasons.

“In that case, you should act right away and go see him during his lunch break,” Haugspori proposed.

Linnea flinched. “H-Huh?! You mean *today*?!”

“Of course I do,” he replied matter-of-factly.

“C-Can’t it at least wait until tomorrow?” she asked timidly.

She’d only just finished discussing such a grave matter with him, after all. She wanted at least a day to reset things before trying again.

“What are you saying? If you wish to become closer to him, then seeing him more often is the only proper way to go about it, yes?”

“W-Well...”

“And in the first place, your position was originally that of an outsider. You began several steps behind the other women in terms of getting acquainted with him.”

“Urgh...” Linnea couldn’t say anything in response; he’d brought up a painfully good point.

Up until the founding of the Steel Clan, Linnea had been Yuuto’s sworn younger sister, but still an “outside sibling” — not truly part of his clan. She’d only ever been able to see him at most once, maybe twice a month.

Whatever the reasons may be, Linnea had certainly felt a difference between how he was with her versus with the women who’d served under him since his days in the Wolf Clan. It felt as if the two of them weren’t as able to readily

confide in one another.

“You have finally become his sworn daughter, a much closer part of his inner circle, so what is there to be gained by hesitating now?! It’s true that in matters of love, it’s sometimes important to pull back and give the other person space, but fundamentally you should always be pressing the attack!”

“I... I see...” As Haugspori laid out one argument after another, Linnea found herself nodding in agreement.

It did feel a little bit like he was pushing her too forcefully on this, but she understood that it was because he wholeheartedly cared for her.

Additionally, Linnea was someone who lent credence to the words of an expert on subjects she had difficulty with. It was one of her strong points.

“All right. I’ll do as you say. However, I’m somewhat behind with my work for today, thanks to how distracted I was this morning. Let me at least take care of that first.”

“Understood, Princess. Please allow me to assist you.”

Linnea nodded. “Thank you, I’m counting on you.”

And so, Linnea spent a good while completely absorbed in her own office work.

As the second-in-command of a large nation like the Steel Clan, the volume of work kept her as terribly busy as Yuuto, if not even more so.

She needed to give careful scrutiny to the proposals that made their way up the chain of command to her, and send for the persons responsible if she had any important questions, listening to their explanations and then giving concrete instructions.

If the clan administration was like a human body, with Yuuto as the brain, then one could say Linnea was the heart that kept it alive.

Yuuto’s novel ideas and inventions were the driving force behind the growth of the Steel Clan, and anyone would agree that he was the symbolic “pillar” holding the whole confederation together. But one could also argue that they only needed him *there* to function, without necessarily needing him to perform

daily office work.

However, if Linnea failed to perform her duties, there was no question that various parts of the government would start jamming up, causing all sorts of problems and confusion for the people at the bottom.

“All right, next is...”

With yet another task completed, Linnea reached out to grab the next document from the stack in front of her, only to have it pulled out of her hand.

“What’s the matter, Haugspori?”

“I apologize for stopping you when you are so engrossed in your duties, but, it’s time.”

“Time...? Ah!” Linnea shouted, suddenly realizing she’d completely forgotten about the plan.

Whenever she really concentrated on her work, she became unable to think about anything else.

“Reginarch Yuuto has gone to visit the Vingólf Garden. It seems he often takes his lunches there as of late.”

“Ah, right, Vingólf. It *is* a fine place to relax.”

Linnea was, in fact, very familiar with the location in question.

Her biological father, Hrungnir, had at one point in time been the governor of the Gimlé area, and Linnea had heard stories about how he met and fell in love with the woman who would become her mother at the Vingólf Garden.

It was the place which fostered the love between Linnea’s parents, and so she had visited it herself many times.

At this time of year, the place would be filled with the color of the cosmos flowers and other flowers of autumn in full bloom.

The thought brought back fond memories, and Linnea reminisced a bit as she made her way there.

Upon entering, she soon spotted Yuuto inside the pavilion at the center of the garden.

“Fath...” She immediately began to call out to him but stopped herself. Felicia, sitting next to Yuuto, had turned toward her and put a finger silently to her lips.

Linnea did her best not to make a sound as she slowly walked over to them. Yuuto was sitting with his head resting on his arms on top of the pavilion table, his eyes closed.

“He’s sleeping, then?”

“Yes, only just now, in fact. He had so much on his mind yesterday, I can only presume he did not sleep much last night.”

“I see. That’s understandable.”

Linnea knew just how overwhelmingly powerful Yuuto’s sense of responsibility was.

Faced with this unprecedented crisis and his duty to protect the clan and the many, many people who lived under its rule, he must not have been able to stop himself from continuing to think about the problem even after lying down for the night.

“Still, he will hurt his poor neck sleeping in this position.”

Felicia moved from her seat across the table, to sit right next to Yuuto. Slowly, and gently, so as not to wake him up, she lifted his head from off of the table and brought it to rest in her lap.

“Tee-hee.” With a soft giggle, she tenderly stroked his hair, and gazed down at his sleeping face, her eyes filled with loving affection.

Linnea was no expert in the intimate affairs of men and women, but she understood what she was seeing.

At the very least, the act of stroking a person’s head was disrespectful when done to someone higher in status. In the past, Felicia would not have allowed herself to do something so forward.

“Umm... Aunt Felicia... Have you, um, and Father, that is...”

It was hard to bring herself to ask the question directly. Linnea stumbled, unable to find the right words.

“Ah.” Felicia seemed to discern what Linnea was asking, though. She nodded and said, “Yes. Thanks to the intervention of Big Sister Mitsuki, I have had the honor of consummating my love with Big Brother Yuuto. And, well, it *is* right after his wedding ceremony, so the timing is a bit improper, but he has promised to grant me the honor of officially becoming his concubine at the first appropriate opportunity.” Felicia’s cheeks were flushed. She sounded a bit bashful, but also very happy.

“I-I see,” Linnea replied awkwardly. “So, you and Father are now...”

She could tell that her own voice was quavering.

She’d intended to be prepared for this, but actually hearing it firsthand, being told that the man she loved was in that sort of relationship with another woman, made her heart ache with jealousy.

In her thoughts Linnea tried to encourage herself, to tell herself that if he’d accepted having a relationship with Felicia, then maybe there was a chance for her, too... but she felt that small hope being crushed as her gaze wandered over the other woman’s beautiful, soft, voluptuous body.

That full, enormous chest of hers in particular!

Yuuto’s wife Mitsuki was also well-endowed in her own right.

By contrast, if Linnea were to look down at her own assets, she could also clearly see her own feet. There wasn’t enough there to block her view, after all.

When Linnea compared herself to the other two women, she couldn’t help but feel a sense of inferiority, questioning if she wasn’t outright lacking any womanly charm whatsoever.

“You’re incredible. Father’s heart was so devoted to Big Sister Mitsuki alone, as well-guarded as the armored carriages of the Wagon Wall, and yet you still coaxed it to surrender to you. I wish I could be so lucky.”

“No, it was entirely because Big Sister Mitsuki intervened on my behalf. Alone, I would have never...”

“There’s no need to be modest. Even as a fellow woman, I recognize how charming and attractive you are. So much so that it makes me envious, in fact.

Meanwhile, I will always be treated like his younger sister, and I can't be sure he even sees me as a woman." Linnea let out a forlorn sigh.

Her rival in love was hardly the proper audience for her complaints right now, but she couldn't contain her feelings any longer.

"Th-That isn't..."

"No need to console me out of pity. I know well enough that my face and body are practically that of a child's."

"Erm, but..."

Felicia was trying to respond, but paused and trailed off, seemingly unsure what to say.

"And as for my personality, I'm a thoroughly boring woman. When I came to Father's office earlier today, that was actually because I was trying to get closer to him. Yet despite that, before I realized it, I was going on and on with him about strategy and politics, every trace of romantic thought tossed aside."

"I should hardly think it could be helped, given the situation at that moment..." Once again, Felicia tried to get a word in to assuage Linnea's concerns.

"No," Linnea said, shaking her head. "It's more than that. If I think back, it's always been this way. Whenever I talk with Father, it's always, *always* about politics and work. It should be no wonder he doesn't see me as a woman."

"...Lady Linnea, this may be a bit presumptuous of me, but I honestly believe that your personality is in fact one of the qualities that makes you attractive, and that it is something that you, and only you, possess."

"I already told you, I don't need you to..." As Linnea frowned and began to protest, Felicia gently shook her head and cut in.

"I am not saying this to console you. Big Brother Yuuto is always talking about how he can count on being able to speak with you about important matters in depth. His ideas are very complex, and there are many times when they are too advanced for me to understand. However, you are different. He has said to me that you are the *only one* who can understand things right away after just a

short explanation, and not only that, come back with constructive opinions from a realistic perspective. He says that that sort of thing truly helps him.”

“Big Brother said all that about me?” Linnea asked. She was so surprised that for a moment she unconsciously reverted back to the way she used to address him when they were sworn siblings.

It was true that many of the strategies Yuuto concocted were far removed from common sense, or assumed foreknowledge of things that other people didn’t have, and so even Linnea often had trouble comprehending them.

Also—and the plan he’d shared with her earlier today was a prime example of this—often the only solid thing was the concept and its conclusion. That is, he knew exactly what needed to be done, but the concrete details of how to actually make that work were much more spotty or vague.

Of course, from Linnea’s perspective, that actually illustrated a strength of Yuuto’s, rather than a shortcoming.

As ruling lord, the most important action that a patriarch must take is determining a proper course of action and then firmly committing to it. If the person meant to stand out in front of everyone and lead them forward was too focused on practicality and details, there could be no development, no forward progress.

That being said, in order to take Yuuto’s directives and convert them into concrete, feasible plans, someone needed to look at them critically from a pragmatic perspective, and point out their problems and flaws.

Since the formation of the Steel Clan, it had chiefly been Linnea who had taken on that role.

“I’m always finding fault with the details of Father’s wonderful ideas, and I just assumed I was always making him unhappy with that...” Linnea said, coming clean with one of the niggling concerns that had always been tormenting her.

Felicia shook her head vigorously, denying Linnea’s concern outright. “When the both of you were discussing how to deal with the imperial subjugation order, it was as if you each understood what the other was saying, instantly

moving on to the next point without need for a single moment's hesitation. To my embarrassment, I must admit that I could not keep up at all."

Thinking back now, it did seem to Linnea like she and Yuuto had taken it upon themselves to discuss the topic at a rapid pace, while Felicia had mostly not entered into the conversation at all.

Linnea had simply assumed that Felicia had held back on account of being a sibling subordinate, a rank which was normally considered to be a step removed from the central planning of a clan's government. But that assumption had apparently been mistaken.

"Lady Linnea, the reason Big Brother was able to open up and share his secret with you is precisely because you are the kind of person you are."

"Did you hear from him about what he told me?"

"No, I chose not to broach the subject with him. After all... it is something he cannot bring himself to talk to me about." Felicia cast her eyes downward, looking a bit lonely. But that look quickly passed, and she smiled.

"However, after he spoke with you about it, there was less pain in his expression, as if a small amount of the darkness hanging over his heart had faded away."

"I see. In that case, I'm glad I could help him a little."

"It is much more than 'a little'! Big Brother Yuuto had been so worn down by tension and stress as of late that I could scarcely stand to watch. I worried that, if it continued, he might be pushed to his breaking point."

This was coming from Felicia, who spent every waking moment of each day serving at Yuuto's side.

If she was this openly apprehensive about it, then Yuuto really had been in a dangerous state.

"I'm just so glad you could help him. Truly..." With an expression of heartfelt relief, Felicia once again began gently stroking Yuuto's hair. Yuuto continued to sleep peacefully, blissfully unaware of the concern he was receiving from the woman looking down upon him.

“Ugh, nghh!” Suddenly, Yuuto cried out in his sleep.

“Wh-What happened?!” Linnea asked.

“Most likely, he is having a nightmare,” Felicia explained. “He has them often, lately.”

“I... I see.”

This seemed pretty serious. It would explain all the more why Mitsuki and Felicia had been so worried about him.

“I think there is likely still a lot that Big Brother has been suppressing inside himself.”

“Yes, probably so.”

Linnea had managed to get Yuuto to confide his secret to her, but it was something he’d been holding onto alone for half a year.

Extraordinary hero though he may be, he was also still only human.

There was surely half a year’s worth of frustration, bitterness, and anguish he’d built up as well.

“Ah, of course!” Felicia suddenly clapped her hands together, as if she’d suddenly hit upon an idea. “This is the perfect opportunity. As Big Brother says, one must ‘strike while the iron is hot.’ Let us use this chance and get him to release *everything* that he’s been holding in.”

“Everything? You make it sound easy, but what are we going to do?”

“Tee-hee, well...” Felicia smiled mischievously, and as she described her plan, Linnea’s eyes went wide.

It felt so forward, and so *hasty*, skipping right past several of the proper steps for these sorts of things from Linnea’s point of view, but now Felicia was completely determined to go forward with it. She looked Linnea straight in the eyes and then bowed deeply.

“I humbly ask that you take care of Big Brother Yuuto. Please, help to heal his heart.”

“Y-You’re really sure I can just go in?!” Linnea stood facing the open door, unable to hide her trepidation.

They were in what some might call the innermost “heart” of Gimlé, a sacred place to which entry by the unworthy was unforgivable. Even Yuuto’s direct subordinates, his most trusted inner circle, were not permitted to enter this sanctum uninvited.

Despite this, Felicia’s response was a relaxed nod.

“Oh, there is no problem.”

“B-But still...”

“Why would you have cause to hesitate *now*? You have already been with him in this way twice before, haven’t you?”

“Yes, but those times I was together with everyone else, and going by myself isn’t exactly the same.”

“If you’re a woman, then show some courage!” Felicia’s hands were at Linnea’s back, pushing her forcefully through the doorway and into the room beyond.



One last shove pushed Linnea off balance, and as she was busy recovering her footing, the door was shut behind her.

“H-Hey!”

“I wish you the very best of luck!”

“Ngh...!” Linnea’s face flushed. With her only escape cut off, she stood there for a moment at a total loss.

However, she couldn’t just stand around here forever.

This *was* the kind of chance she had always wished for, that much was true. If she couldn’t even take advantage of that, then she really did have no hope at all.

“All right!” Steeling her resolve, Linnea threw off all of the clothes she was wearing and walked naked towards the far end of the room.

On the far wall was another door, and she opened it to reveal clouds of thick white steam that filled the air beyond, making it hard to see anything.

For Linnea right now, that was actually a convenience. It meant he wouldn’t be able to see her either, which lessened the embarrassment just a little.

“Ahh, now this is what paradise feels like. I feel alive again.” Yuuto’s voice echoed from a bit further in.

This room was an enclosed bath that Yuuto had ordered specially built when he moved the capital of the Steel Clan to Gimlé. Yuuto was a huge fan of hot baths, and every night after finishing up his work, it was his routine to come here and relieve the day’s stress with a long soak.

“Oh, hey, Felicia. Come on in, the water’s fine,” Yuuto called out, evidently having sensed Linnea’s presence in the room.

However, it seemed he’d mistakenly assumed she was Felicia.

There was currently an unspoken arrangement that had recently formed between Yuuto and his lovers: The person who would share the bed with him that night would join him in the bath beforehand. In other words, tonight was

Felicia's turn.

"Father."

"Whuh?" Yuuto whirled around when Linnea called to him, and then froze up.

"L-Linnea?! Wh-Why...?!"

Apparently, even the war god reborn, ruler of the battlefield, was flustered by this situation.

Linnea felt her whole body growing feverishly hot.

Despite being a woman, she'd worked her way up to be second-in-command of the Steel Clan. She was responsible for the administration of one of the most powerful nations in the realm.

That said, she was still a young lady... Revealing her unclothed body to the man she loved was embarrassing.

Still, she screwed up all of her courage and spoke to him.

"I... I asked to switch places with her. O-Oh, and of course I've already received permission from Big Sister Mitsuki."

"Those two..." Yuuto pressed his fingers to his temples and groaned. It seemed he'd already gotten the basic gist of the situation.

"Please, do not blame either of them, Father," Linnea pleaded. "They were only worried about you."

"*What?*" Yuuto frowned suspiciously, seemingly unable to make sense of this part.

"They agreed that the best place for getting you to lay bare your heart would be in the bath. You must still have a lot of bitter frustration and pain that you have kept locked up within yourself for the past half-year. As I already know the secret you were keeping, you have no need to hide those from me either. Just being able to talk about it with someone should help you feel better."

"...Is it just me, or are those two just a *little* too overprotective towards me?" Yuuto shook his head wearily and sighed.

Linnea might well be the best person for Yuuto to talk to right now, but his

wife and concubine had still just sent an unmarried woman to be alone in the bath with him. Even Linnea internally agreed that it was clearly crossing a line. But even so...

“That shows just how much of a dangerous state you appeared to be in to them, Father.”

“Do I really come across as that undependable?”

“There is no one more capable and dependable than you in all of the Steel Clan, Father. But that does not mean you can simply take every burden onto yourself in order to protect everyone else. That will eventually wear you down and break you.”

The fates of tens of thousands of lives were always resting on Yuuto’s shoulders.

And there was no plan, no strategy, that could guarantee happiness for every single person.

Following through with any policy creates benefits for some and loss or harm for others; that was the way of the world.

If one allowed oneself to feel pained over every person’s misfortunes, it would be paralyzing, and one’s mind wouldn’t be able to hold up under the stress.

In one sense, those who ruled over others needed to be somewhat insensitive to the unhappiness of other people.

And in that sense, Yuuto was lacking. He was far too kind.

“I’m fine, though, okay? I’m still young.”

“I am not talking about your physical body. What Big Sister Mitsuki and Aunt Felicia are concerned with, and if I may be frank, what I am concerned with, is your heart!”

“...Hey, I’ll be okay.”

The second time, Yuuto’s response was just a little delayed.

He likely realized himself that he was at his limit.

And it's no surprise he is, Linnea thought to herself.

After all, the burden of such a terrible secret was far too heavy for one man to bear alone.

“Father, you are too reckless when it comes to your own well-being! Our people are facing a crisis like nothing we’ve ever seen before, and if by some terrible chance the worst were to happen to you, the Steel Clan itself would be in danger of collapse! Don’t you understand?! *Big Brother*, your body isn’t just yours alone anymore!”

Linnea had lost control for a moment, shouting everything in one breath. She stood there, panting heavily.

Yuuto gave her a wry smile, one that looked a little forced.

“Well, just come on and get in the water for now. It might be warm in here, but if you stand around naked you’ll probably end up catching a cold.”

He gestured for her to join him in the bath.

“...All right.”

Even after all she’d said, he was still trying to pay more consideration to other people than to himself. It saddened her, but she obeyed. Otherwise he might not be willing to listen to her anymore, or so she thought.

Once Linnea was in the bath, Yuuto looked up towards the ceiling, gazing into nothing as he spoke. “I know this sounds like an excuse, but, the reason I kept from telling you all wasn’t because I don’t trust you. It was because I thought not knowing would be easier on you. You could live your days without that fear in your hearts.”

Under the surface of the water, Linnea felt herself clenching her fists.

It looked like maybe some of what she’d said had reached Yuuto’s heart.

“Ever since I found out, I can’t stop thinking about it every day. Like ‘When’s it all going to start? What if it starts tomorrow?’ I have these nightmares where I see everybody drowning at the bottom of the ocean, struggling, in pain. I keep having them, you see. Again, and again.”

“...I know that must feel horrible.” Linnea’s own face twisted in sympathetic

pain.

Every living person dies. The gods had placed this fundamental law upon the world, and no one could defy it.

However, the only reason a person could live his or her life without feeling suffering from constant dread about that fate was because, until that moment, death existed at “some unknown time in the future.”

And in this situation, it wasn't just about Yuuto's own death. *Everyone* in the world around him was headed for the same, certain death.

That fear had been assaulting him every single day without pause.

From this point forward, Linnea would have to go up against that fear as well, but she had her belief in Yuuto. It was a deep-seated conviction that Yuuto would do something to save them all.

But Yuuto himself didn't have anything like that.

Just imagining what it must be like for him sent a terrible chill down Linnea's spine. She was amazed that he'd even managed to endure it for a whole half-year by himself.

“Mitsuki's pregnant now, and I'm sure as hell not gonna tell her and risk the shock causing her to miscarry. And Felicia's strong, sure, but she's actually pretty mentally fragile in ways too... Well, anyway, I *was* planning to finally tell everybody about it once I had the solution planned out and ready to go. I just thought, I'm the only one who needs to feel like this until then, you know?”

“You truly are a kind person,” Linnea said, but Yuuto reacted to those words with a weak, self-deprecating smile.

“Heh heh, well, that's what I'd told myself, but it turns out it was harder than I thought, and much scarier than I thought. It hurt more than I thought it would. I just wanted to give in and tell someone, and I almost did give in, so many times. I bet that shatters your image of me, huh? The great man you called the most dependable and reliable in all of the Steel Clan, and he's actually just pathetic and weak.”

“Th-That isn't true at all!” Linnea shouted the denial at Yuuto at the top of her

lungs.

Her heroic image of him hadn't been damaged. There was no way that it would be.

After all, Yuuto had been given the choice to stay in his former homeland and live there alongside Mitsuki in peace.

He had thrown aside that option. In order to save the Steel Clan, nay, in order to save his *family here*, he had chosen instead to return to this land without regard for the danger to himself.

Acts of bravery ignorant of fear were nothing more than the recklessness of fools. Linnea's father had taught her that.

He'd taught her that a true hero was someone who knew fear and still showed courage despite it, enduring the fear and pressing forward.

"H-Huh?! Wh-What is this?!"

Suddenly, Yuuto began shivering, his teeth chattering loudly, as if he'd somehow been snatched from the hot baths and tossed onto a snowy mountainside.

After finally opening up to Linnea, something in him had snapped, and now all of his suppressed feelings were pouring out.

"D-Damn it, I c-can't stop shaking. I've got to protect everyone, I'm the goddamn reginarch, I have to pull myself together! Stop already! Stop!"

"...!" Linnea couldn't bear it any longer. Before she was even aware of it, she had run to Yuuto and embraced him.

"It's okay! It's just you and me here right now, no one else. You don't have to force yourself to hold it together, you can let go!"

"Uugh...!"

Yuuto let out a wordless cry, like a whimper, and returned her embrace.

As he shook, every shudder communicated the depth of his fear directly through his body and into hers.

Linnea knew that this wasn't an act of love, but even if he was only holding

her now because he was afraid, it still made her happy.

He was relying on her.

She was able to help him.

Yuuto had always been a great hero in Linnea's eyes.

The young man shaking in her arms right now was far from heroic, perhaps, but if anything, the love she felt for him was stronger than it had ever been before.

All she wanted was to make him feel safe. That one desire filled her heart, and she clung to him tightly, her hands clutching against the back of his shoulders.

She wasn't sure how long they stayed like that, but eventually, Yuuto's body stopped shaking.

Instead, she felt something else, something hard pressing against her near her belly.

Th-That's...

Linnea quickly realized what it was, and she could feel the heat of her face flushing bright red.

Her body was already pretty heated up from the bath, so the combined effect made her feel dizzy.

"Uhh, I'm, uh, I'm fine now. You can let go of me," Yuuto said, sounding pretty awkward.

"N-No, it's... all right. I don't mind." Linnea felt like her face was going to catch on fire, but she somehow managed to get the words out.

"No, as a guy, if I stay like this with you, I can't exactly control, what, um..."

"I'm saying that I don't mind." Linnea was stronger this time.

"No, listen, I can't..."

"Big Sister Mitsuki has given me her permission to be with you. So if you are willing to love me, even a little, then please...!" Her voice trembled, but she put everything she had left into this declaration of hers.

If she were rejected now, she knew it would devastate her, and she might not recover for quite some time.

However, she couldn't let this moment pass without telling him, and making her feelings clear.

There was a short silence between them, then Yuuto gently put his arms around her shoulders, and pushed her off of him.

It seemed like that was his answer.

"Y-You... don't see me as anything more than a younger sister, do you? You don't see me as a woman you could ever want to make love to, do you?" Linnea could feel heat behind her eyes, and tears began to fall down her face.

She couldn't help asking, even though she knew these questions were unfair to Yuuto.

"...Of *course* I do," Yuuto said, almost angrily, and he looked deep into Linnea's eyes. "But I won't be able to give my love to you alone. I won't be able to *marry* you. You're still all right with that?"

"...Eh?"

Linnea blinked several times in confusion. She had fully been expecting this to be a rejection.

It took a moment for her to process Yuuto's words, but as soon as their meaning dawned on her, she shouted, "Yes! Yes, it's all right, it's totally okay!"

She nodded her head vigorously, over and over. Yuuto had just agreed to accept her love, and the last thing she wanted was for her short delay to make him think she had hesitated over agreeing to his conditions.

"You *do* know you're technically nobility, right, 'Princess'? The patriarch of the Horn Clan, and daughter by birth of the previous one? Are you seriously okay with settling for this?"

"I don't mind at all. If I can have your love, then I don't care what form it takes! But what about you, Father? Are *you* all right with this?"

"Yeah, I am. There's no point in holding back anymore, really. If you eat a bite of poisoned food, you might as well lick the plate clean, as they say."

“Wh-What does that mean?! I hope you’re not calling me poison!” Linnea protested.

Yuuto flashed her an impish grin. “Heh heh, sorry, sorry. You’re right, there’s no way a girl as cute as you could ever be poisonous.”

He leaned in and brought his face close to Linnea’s, and she closed her eyes.

She knew that whatever dark things might be waiting in their future, the pure happiness she felt right now was something she would never forget.

“How is it, Linnea? Do you like it?” Yuuto asked.

“Yes. It... it feels wonderful,” Linnea replied in a breathy tone, and let out a sigh.

She could feel Yuuto’s own slightly rough breaths against her ear.

“Does it hurt?”

“N-No, I’m all right. It doesn’t hurt at all.”

“Are you tense? You can let yourself relax a little more.”

“R-Right.” Linnea nodded, but inwardly she knew that would be impossible.

She would have never thought Yuuto would do this sort of thing to her...!

“Okay, I’m going to put it on you.”

“G-Go ahead!”

All at once, hot liquid poured onto her back.

“Th-Thank you. I’m so honored to have you wash my back like this, Father.”

“Well, you washed mine just a few minutes ago. It’s only natural for me to return the favor.”

“You say it’s natural, but I’ve never heard of a custom like that.”

As far as the common knowledge of Yggdrasil was concerned, washing a person’s back was something only done for someone of a higher status than yourself, never the other way around. That was the custom Linnea knew.

“In the world I came from, this is what’s normal. All right then, how about we

go relax in the bath one more time? You're pretty worn out, right?"

"Ah, n-no, I'm all right."

"Mm? What's wrong, you dizzy from being in the heat too long?"

"No, it's, um. I didn't think it would be right for me to dirty the bathwater with blood..."

"Oh... I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking." Yuuto clapped his hands together and bowed his head in apology.

"No, I'm sorry for making you feel awkward..." Linnea trailed off, and her gaze traveled down to a certain part of Yuuto's lower body.

It wasn't worn out at all.

"Um, does that mean you want to do it some more?"

"Oh! No, this is just, it happened on its own while I was washing your back... I'm sorry I don't have enough self-control."

"U-Um, if it's my fault you got like this, then it's my responsibility to take care of it, right?"

"H-Hey, now, you're still hurting from last time, right? You don't have to..."

"I'm all right. If you're willing, I can do it as many times as you want..."

"Um. Okay, then..."

"I am very sorry to intrude upon your bath!" Just as the air between the two new lovers was turning sweet again, they were interrupted by a sudden shout filled with urgency.

"Wh-What is it, Felicia?!" Yuuto shouted.

"It is an urgent message from one of our undercover spies embedded in the Lightning Clan," Felicia replied breathlessly.

"The Lightning Clan? Is their army making a move?" Yuuto inquired, his face already that of a stern and commanding patriarch again.

Felicia had been the one to arrange this rendezvous between him and Linnea in the first place. If she was willing to interrupt it with a message, then it was

one of serious importance.

Linnea swallowed nervously as well, apprehensive as to what this could possibly be.

Currently, the Lightning Clan was in the middle of a war with the powerful Flame Clan to their south. Perhaps the Flame Clan army had been defeated, and the Lightning Clan army was using that momentum to march back north and invade the Steel Clan. It seemed implausible if one were going by common military sense, but with that clan's battle-crazy warriors, and in particular the man who led them, it was fully possible.

However, Felicia's next words described something that was even more completely impossible than what Linnea had imagined.

"Steinþórr, patriarch of the Lightning Clan, has fallen in battle."

ACT 3

“What the hell’s going on?! That idiot’s *dead*?!”

Yuuto had left the bath, rushed straight back to his office, and immediately sent for Kristina. When she arrived, those were the first words out of his mouth.

Even now, Yuuto referred to Steinþórr only as “that idiot,” but he was all too aware of the man’s overwhelming strength.

Yuuto had introduced military tactics from far beyond this era, such as longspear-equipped phalanx formations, and the mobile fortress made from linked wagon carriages known as the Wagon Wall. And yet, this one man had overcome all of that with his own individual physical strength. It was no exaggeration to say that Steinþórr’s power placed him outside the bounds of what could even be considered human. He was a monster, pure and simple.

Sure, war was unpredictable, and anything could happen out on the battlefield. However, he was the sort of man who could be surrounded by ten thousand soldiers and likely mow them down without breaking a sweat. It was hard to believe someone like that could have died in battle.

“The report states that eight days ago, the Lightning Clan and Flame Clan armies engaged each other at Fort Waganea in southern Lightning Clan territory, and that Steinþórr was killed in the fighting.”

Kristina replied matter-of-factly, her eyes scanning over the report in her hand.

“Eight days ago, huh?” Yuuto muttered to himself.

The Steel Clan had messenger pigeons, which they could use to send information much faster than by horse, but preparing the birds for use took some degree of time and effort, so they were generally only used for urgent messages. Most of their communications were delivered by messengers on horseback.

Furthermore, riding directly on horseback was not as common in other

countries, so the rider would stand out. To counter this, they traveled by foot or horse-drawn wagon while in enemy territory, disguising themselves as ordinary travelers or merchants.

Considering that the incident took place in the southern part of the Lightning Clan's territory, eight days was just about the fastest this information could get to him, but it still wasn't *fresh* anymore, and that was everything when it came to intel.

Yuuto had grown up used to the instantaneity of cell phones, and so he couldn't help but feel like all of this was far too slow.

"What are the chances this is a false report?" he asked.

The deliberate leaking of false intel in order to confuse the enemy was a fairly frequent occurrence, as was the unintentional warping of information into something completely fictitious as it spread from person to person.

In fact, Steinþórr had been mistakenly considered dead for a while after the First Battle of Élivágar River, and when Yuuto had been forcibly sent back to modern Japan, rumors had spread that the Panther Clan had killed him.

In particular, one had to consider the fact that the presence or absence of the Lightning Clan patriarch on the battlefield made such an enormous difference in how threatening his army was. Spreading false info that Steinþórr was dead could lure the Steel Clan into lowering its guard and advancing its armies into vulnerable positions, allowing the supposedly dead patriarch to ambush and rout the unwary forces.

It was reasonable enough to think that sort of strategy could be at play here, even if it was pretty at-odds with his impressions of Steinþórr, who had historically preferred to simply rush his enemy headfirst. If Yuuto took action based on false information, he could wind up paying a hard price in casualties for it.

Being extra careful and suspicious here was the best course of action.

"At this point in time, we cannot say anything with complete certainty, of course," Kristina replied. "However, in all likelihood, it should be reasonable to assume the report of his death is not mistaken."

“Based on what?”

“At present, the Flame Clan army is continuing its invasion of Lightning Clan territory, and even the most conservative estimates put them at no less than thirty thousand in number.”

“Th... *Thirty thousand?!?*” Yuuto shouted wildly.

Sure, the Flame Clan was both large and powerful enough to be counted among the Ten Great Clans of the realm, but that number went far beyond anything he’d expected.

The number of people a nation could mobilize into an army was usually proportional to that nation’s agricultural productivity.

The Steel Clan had the Norfolk crop rotation system and good quality fertilizer, far outpacing any of their surrounding nations in terms of the productivity of each acre of their farmable land, and even with all that, the largest army they could maintain right now was just over twenty thousand.

How could the Flame Clan have such a staggering number of soldiers on hand using only the techniques of this ancient era? Yuuto didn’t have the slightest clue.

“You sure those numbers aren’t being trumped up?” Yuuto asked.

The flow of momentum in a battle was largely determined by the balance of numbers and troop morale. Announcing exaggerated troop numbers to encourage allies and stir unrest among enemies was a widely-used strategy all over the world.

Kristina, however, shook her head, her expression still grim. “I believe they aren’t. In fact, I would say there’s more of a chance the real numbers are even greater. These estimates are coming from the Lightning Clan, and I can see little reason for them to falsify them higher. In the midst of a large-scale invasion into their territory, it would further upset the morale of their own soldiers and risk tempting their other neighbors to join in the attack.”

“That’s true,” Yuuto agreed.

Meanwhile, the Lightning Clan couldn’t have more than ten thousand in their

army at most.

Steinþórr was a battle-crazed berserker who wished nothing more than to take on strong opponents, but he was also surprisingly skilled at decision-making on the field.

There was no way he'd be stupid enough to risk making his situation even worse by inviting more enemy nations to start attacking him now.

"So, then, crushed under the weight of those sheer numbers, I guess even that idiot finally reached the limits of his strength, huh?"

"Actually, it appears that wasn't quite the case."

"Excuse me?! Oh come on, don't tell me there's something else..."

Steinþórr's death in battle, and an army of over thirty thousand—Yuuto had just been handed two revelations that would normally seem impossible.

Two surprises make way for a third, as the saying went, but Yuuto had gone past surprise and into something more like annoyance.

...Or so he thought, until Kristina's next words delivered the greatest shock so far.

"Er, exact details are scarce at the moment, but... according to the accounts of soldiers who fled the battle in question, there was a sudden, terrible noise from the ranks of the Flame Clan formation—and then Steinþórr and his front-line fighters fell to the ground, spraying blood from wounds that suddenly appeared."

"What?!"

"The soldiers didn't seem to understand what had happened, either. They claimed it must have been some sort of witchcraft. However, going by their accounts, the sounds they describe seem to resemble that of the tetsuhau..."

"It... It can't be..." Yuuto whispered, his face growing pale.

One possibility crossed his mind immediately, a terrible flash of insight.

Yuuto's hand moved to his waist, and he unholstered the weapon he now carried for emergency self-defense.

In an ironic twist, Yuuto himself had also concluded that this was the only weapon capable of taking down that twin-runed monster.



“What is that?” Kristina asked.

With a stiff expression, Yuuto replied, “This is called a ‘gun.’”

It was a Makarov PM: a medium-sized, semi-automatic pistol, adopted as the Soviet Union’s standard military and police side arm in 1951.

Yuuto remembered how freaked-out he’d been when his father Tetsuhito handed it to him with an unceremonious *“Here, take this.”*

Tetsuhito was a professional Japanese swordsmith, and apparently his clientele included a few people from the less savory part of society, so he’d used those connections to obtain the weapon.

“Use it to protect yourself.”

In the past, Yuuto had always assumed the man never even spared any thought for him, but the truth was that he’d even been willing to break the law to help his son. It turned out he was actually pretty reckless in his protectiveness.

“It’s a ranged weapon,” Yuuto continued, explaining to Kristina. “It uses gunpowder, just like the tetsuhau bombs we used against the Panther Clan riders. When the powder ignites, the explosive force is channeled into firing a small metal bullet, about the size of the tip of your little finger, at a much higher speed and over a greater distance than arrows. The bullets can pierce right through your targets. It’s an extremely lethal weapon.”

“That is... quite the troublesome weapon to face, then.” Kristina, usually so cool and detached, now gulped nervously.

In a battle between armies, the weapon that dealt the most kills and injuries was not the spear or the sword—it was the bow and arrow.

There was a certain phrase used in the world of Japanese martial arts, or more specifically, in kendo: the “Rule of Three.” It referred to the idea that in order for an unarmed martial artist to win against an opponent armed with a sword, the former would need to have three times as many skill ranks as the latter.

By the same token, someone with a sword would need to be three times as

skilled as an opponent wielding a spear.

It was a way of expressing just how much of an advantage you gain in a fight if you are able to attack your opponent from outside of their range.

It was because of this principle that Yuuto had devoted his efforts early on into developing more powerful ranged weapons for his army such as composite bows and crossbows, so he could attack his enemies from further away.

There was also the problem of the bullets themselves. One could respond and react to normal arrows to an extent, attempting to dodge or block them. With a projectile much smaller and moving much faster, however, that would be a difficult, if not infeasible, prospect.

One could thus say that it was only natural that over the course of human history, the gun supplanted and eventually eliminated the bow as a weapon of war.

But that was all history from three thousand years into Yggdrasil's future. These were weapons that weren't supposed to exist here.

"What the hell *is* this guy?" Yuuto wondered aloud. "Actually, wait, I still don't know his name, now that I think about it."

Previously, Yuuto had received a message from the Flame Clan patriarch marked with his name seal, but the letters had been an unreadable mess, looking like a bunch of squiggly lines.

Still, this was the man whom Yuuto was going to try to persuade to become his sworn brother via the Oath of the Chalice. Not knowing his name already was a terrible oversight.

Sure, lately he'd been completely occupied with the coalition of surrounding enemy nations, and the doom awaiting Yggdrasil in the near future, but that was still no excuse for ignorance.

He suddenly realized just how right Mitsuki and Felicia had been to worry about him—he clearly had been working past his limits.

"It is Nobunaga."

"Huh?"

At first, Yuuto didn't understand what Kristina had said.

After all, it was a word that didn't belong to Yggdrasil's language.

A beat passed, and Yuuto realized she'd just told him the *name* of the Flame Clan patriarch. In Yuuto's mind, all the disparate pieces of information started to connect, like a puzzle assembling itself.

"That's... I see now. So that's what this is," he muttered, wide-eyed. "Felicia. Send another message to Ginnar; he should still be in Flame Clan territory. Tell him to do everything he can to speed along the process of negotiating for the Oath of the Sibling Chalice with the Flame Clan patriarch."

"R-Right!" Felicia replied.

"I've just found out that I need to do whatever it takes to meet him in person and have a one-on-one talk," Yuuto added, with a newfound determination.

Yuuto and Mitsuki had come here from the modern era.

In that case, it wouldn't be strange at all if there were other people from other time periods who had somehow wound up here as well.

It wouldn't be strange, even, if one of those people turned out to be a legendary conqueror, the "Demon King" of Japan's Sengoku period, who was supposed to have died in a burning temple, his body swallowed by the flames.

Yuuto felt a cold trickle of sweat run down his back.

Considering the situation he was in now, this was someone he needed to prevent from becoming his enemy, no matter what.

"Sorry for calling you all here so late for the second night in a row," Yuuto began and glanced at the people seated around the table.

Just like the night before, the seven patriarchs of the Steel Clan had gathered for this council meeting. However, there were more people in attendance this time: several of Yuuto's direct child subordinates such as Sigrún, Ingrid, and the Claw Clan twins. All in all, it was a gathering of the important core members of the clan.

"Just a short while ago, I learned some shocking information from Kristina:

Patriarch Steinþórr of the Lightning Clan was killed in a battle against the Flame Clan.”

Several people shouted “What?!” aloud, and a wave of commotion spread throughout the room.

There wasn’t a single person here who didn’t know about the inhuman strength of the man known as the Dólgprásir, the Battle-Hungry Tiger of Vanaheimr.

Each of them had been involved, in some way or another, with the Battle of Gashina back in the spring of this year. It was still fresh in their memories how Steinþórr had been lured into a trap and completely surrounded, only to tear his way out of it through a sheer feat of strength.

“You can’t be faulted for finding this information rather shocking,” Yuuto continued. “After all, I couldn’t believe it at first either, but apparently it’s true.”

This time, there was a chorus of gasps, and the room fell silent once more.

The Flame Clan had not only defeated the Dólgprásir’s army of battle-frenzied warriors on the battlefield; they’d even killed the man himself. Just how strong could they possibly be?

That question, and the fear that came from it, visited the minds of every person there.

“...I wish to ask: By what means did the Flame Clan bring that monster down?” a cool, dignified voice asked.

The question came from a beautiful, silver-haired girl, whose appearance seemed ill-fitting for the oppressive atmosphere of the council meeting.

Her slender, elegant figure made her look dainty and fragile at first glance, but this girl—Sigrún—was the Steel Clan’s most powerful warrior and an accomplished general. She had inherited the title of Mánagarmr, meaning “Strongest Silver Wolf,” handed down to the strongest fighter in each generation by the previous holder.

She had faced Steinþórr in mortal combat several times now, and so she understood his inhuman strength on a more personal, visceral level than

perhaps anyone else there.

In her last encounter with him, she had even used the Realm of Godspeed, an ability she had acquired during a fight to the death with a giant direwolf known as a garmr. This high-level technique forced her mind's reaction speed and her body's reflexes to their absolute limits for a short time... and against Steinþórr, all it had done was enable her to land one tiny scratch on him.

Perhaps that was all the more reason she was asking her question now. She likely could not imagine any method by which the Flame Clan soldiers could kill Steinþórr.

"The full details are still unclear," Yuuto said. "However, if my hypothesis is correct, we can assume it's due to a new type of weapon that uses gunpowder."

"Gunpowder?" Sigrún asked, with a puzzled frown. "While I can see that catching him by surprise, I find it hard to believe that would be enough to defeat him..."

To her knowledge, gunpowder was only used in firecrackers and in light bombs like the tetsuhau.

Utilized against the Panther Clan's armed cavalry, they were frightening weapons indeed, but they were mainly used to sow fear and confusion among the enemy and their horses, rather than directly kill anyone.

She didn't know that there was a gunpowder weapon with a far more terrifying capacity to kill.

"Well, this is all still conjecture. I'm having Kristina continue to investigate the matter, so wait for the results of that."

"Yes, Father!"

"Besides, what's more important right now is not how he was killed, but rather what's going to happen now that he's dead. Without him around, the Lightning Clan army is going to be in shambles, nothing more than a panicked mob in thin armor. Their country's probably in chaos internally as well, having just suddenly learned of his death."

Yuuto paused for a beat, glancing left and right to meet the gazes of the people gathered around the table.

“And so, I’ve made my decision. We’re starting a campaign against the Lightning Clan.”

“...!” Once more, a shockwave of gasps ran through the gathered crowd.

However, this time, their tension came not from fear of a threat, but from excitement and *elation*.

As described earlier, to the people of the Steel Clan, the Lightning Clan was a hated enemy with whom they had gone to war multiple times now.

At the Battle of Gashina, Yuuto’s sudden disappearance had led to their crippling defeat, and at the Second Battle of Élivágar River later on, the Lightning Clan had seized their territory west of the river.

This was an opportunity to avenge those humiliations, better than any they could have asked for.

As for Yuuto himself, he was still in the process of sounding out the Flame Clan patriarch for a potential alliance as sworn brothers. But since they were both rulers of powerful nations, and would be meeting in person to swear the Oath of the Chalice were it to go forward, that process would take a considerable amount of time, even just to pin down the potential date and location for the ceremony.

Yuuto wasn’t planning to spend that time sitting on his hands.

“Personally, I don’t like to kick a man while he’s down, but this is a matter of honor between clans. We’re going to take advantage of this chance and run them over, thoroughly.” Yuuto punctuated this by slamming his fist into the palm of his hand, making perfectly clear that he was committed to the attack.

Most everyone in the room nodded strongly in response, but there was a voice of doubt as well.

“As we are currently under threat from all sides due to the imperial subjugation order, would it not be dangerous to move a large number of our troops? There may be clans who would choose to take advantage of that

opening to strike at us.”

It was Douglas, patriarch of the Ash Clan, who timidly spoke up.

The Ash Clan held territory in the center of the Bifröst highlands, at the easternmost edge of the Steel Clan’s sphere of influence. Before joining the Steel Clan, they had been under threat from other nations in that region such as the Fang Clan and Cloud Clan.

In other words, when this campaign to subjugate the Lightning Clan got underway, Steel Clan military forces would begin concentrating in the west, and as the ones furthest away from the Lightning Clan, the Ash Clan would be left in the most dangerous position.

Douglas’ concerns were perfectly understandable, but Yuuto’s response was to slowly curl his lips into a wicked-looking grin.

“That’s just what I’m aiming for. I’m not going to sit around wondering when our enemies are going to decide to attack us. We might as well take this chance to draw them out, and then smash them all to pieces.” Yuuto stated this casually, as if it were a simple matter.

“Hah hah hah, that is just the sort of response I would expect from you, Father. That boldness of yours never changes.”

“Heh.”

“I see, so we’ll smash them all. I look forward to testing my skill.”

Jörgen, Skáviðr, and Sigrún—Yuuto’s longtime allies from his days in the Wolf Clan—all quickly chimed in positively, even smiling as if reassured by how familiar this was.

Douglas, on the other hand, was still not convinced. “B-But can we be sure it will be so simple as that...?” he asked. “If, for example, the Cloud Clan and Fang Clan decided to invade, it would be too difficult for the Ash Clan to hold out against them by ourselves. Would reinforcements make it to us in time?”

Even if, as Yuuto promised, they ultimately succeeded in crushing the enemy forces lured into invading them, if that came only after the enemy had ravaged Ash Clan lands, Douglas could hardly be expected to stand for it.

He was likely trying to get Yuuto's assurance here that he wouldn't let that happen.

"You'll have nothing to worry about. I'll have the Independent Cavalry Regiment stationed in the area."

"I beg your pardon, my lord? I have never heard that name before."

"That would make sense, seeing as they were only formally established a few days ago."

"...I must again express my concern, then. If they are a freshly-formed regiment of new recruits, I cannot say I feel very reassured."

"Oh, no, these guys are elite fighters, even stronger than the Múspell Special Forces. After all, they're the Panther Clan soldiers we captured as prisoners of war at the Battle of Körmt River."

"Wha...?!" Douglas' eyes went wide in shock.

The extraordinary skill of the Panther Clan riders was, like Steinþórr's incredible strength, something known far and wide throughout the Steel Clan.

"C-Certainly, it is true that they would make for a most reliable ally on the battlefield, but they were until recently our enemies. Can we be sure we can trust them?"

"You've got nothing to worry about there, either," Yuuto said, with complete confidence. "They're going to be desperate to put in good work for us, so they can hold on to the new lives and status they've got now."

In Yggdrasil's historical era, a common custom was to treat prisoners captured from an enemy nation as no better than slaves, and in war they would be forced to man the most dangerous positions on the front lines. However, Yuuto instead valued them for their skills, and would grant them status and treatment in accordance with what they could provide.

The Panther Clan fighters evidently felt a great deal of gratitude towards him for this, so much so that they were putting in requests for him to give them any opportunity to fight for him and prove themselves.

Just to be safe, Yuuto had asked Kristina to use her band of undercover spies,

the Vindálfs, to do a bit of digging. They heard no negative opinions of Yuuto—in fact, they heard nothing but gratitude and high praise for him. There was no reason to doubt their loyalty.

“On top of that,” Yuuto continued, “the troops we’ll send down there to invade will only be a fraction of our usual numbers. Maybe about a third or so. Of course, we’re gonna have everyone conduct their war preparations and marches as if they were *all* going.”

“I see, so then in actuality, we’ll be instructing the majority of them to prepare to move in response to foreign invasion.”

“That’s the plan. Do you still have anything else you’re worried about?”

“No, my lord, seeing that you have thought this far ahead, I have nothing more to say.”

Douglas bowed to Yuuto and resumed his seat.

It looked like Yuuto had finally managed to get him fully on board with his plan.

“All right then! We’ll set the start of the operation at ten days from now. Everyone, return to your respective lands and complete your preparations as soon as possible!”

“Yes, Lord Reginarch!” the attendees all replied as one.

And with that, the plan was officially in motion. The campaign to subjugate the Lightning Clan would soon begin.

“...So that’s what’s happening. I’m sorry! I’m gonna end up being gone for a while again.”

Yuuto clapped his hands together in front of him and bowed low, his eyes closed.

Yuuto, lord and ruler over seven clans, who possessed a commanding presence that allowed him to direct the patriarchs under him to do his bidding with a mere gesture. In all of the Steel Clan, there was only one person to whom Yuuto would make such a humble show of apology.

“I see.” For a brief moment, Mitsuki’s expression was lonely, but in the next instant, she nodded and gave him a smile. “...Okay, I understand. Good luck!”

Having a wife who was so reasonable and understanding only made Yuuto feel more guilty for having to leave her.

“I really am sorry. I know this is a scary time for you, right when you’re probably dealing with anxiety about your first pregnancy...”

“It’s okay, Yuu-kun, I understand. Felicia, take care of Yuu-kun, all right?”

“Yes, of course! I will protect Big Brother Yuuto, even if it costs me my life.”

Felicia’s determined reply was admirable, but Mitsuki’s response was to furrow her brow in a bit of an angry pout.

“I want Yuu-kun to be protected, but I’d *prefer* not to have the sworn sister I love so much die on me either.”

“I also have no intention of dying before I have the chance to hold Big Brother and Big Sister’s new child in my arms.”

“Good, ’cause I want you to be able to hold my baby, too, Felicia.”

Mitsuki was apparently satisfied with Felicia’s answer this time.

The atmosphere in the room was so harmonious right now that the last thing Yuuto wanted to do was ruin it, but there was in fact one more thing he had to tell her.

“Also, well, uh... As it turns out, I’m going to be taking her in as a concubine, too.”

With a strained, uneasy expression, Yuuto reached his arm back to Linnea, who had been standing just behind him. He put his hand on Linnea’s back and pushed her forward.

Honestly, he’d been far more nervous about telling Mitsuki about this than about telling her he’d be gone for a while.

Linnea bowed to Mitsuki deeply. “B-Big Sister Mitsuki, I entrust myself to your care!”

Meanwhile, Mitsuki had leaned in close to Yuuto, and was staring into his face

intently.

“Hmm... Well, *you* sure look like you got some stuff out of your system.”

“Ah! That’s, er...” Linnea looked as if she were remembering something, and she began fidgeting, her face turning bright red.

Yuuto felt the heat of his own face flushing as well.

“Oh. No, no,” Mitsuki said. “I didn’t mean *that*. I meant that your face doesn’t look as grim as it did before, Yuu-kun.”

“...Did I really look that bad?”

“Oh, you did all right. Like this.” Mitsuki scrunched up her face into a glower.

Apparently, it was her imitation of Yuuto.

It was surely a heavy exaggeration, but it still gave Yuuto cause to reflect. He’d been trying this whole time to act like everything was perfectly normal when he was around her.

It looked like Yuuto still had a long way to go when it came to putting on a brave face. Mitsuki was pregnant after all, and he didn’t want to cause her any unnecessary stress...

“And there you go, trying to keep your stress and your worries all to yourself again.” Mitsuki’s pointer finger poked Yuuto right between the eyes, digging in. “If you keep that up you’re going to end up just like Uesugi Kagekatsu, you know.”

“Huh? Wait, you’re talking about the adopted son of Uesugi Kenshin, the God of War, right? He inherited the family line, and he was eventually appointed by the Toyotomi government to be on... the Council of Five Elders, I think it was?”

“That’s right. He was the son of such a huge celebrity, someone everyone said was the strongest and so amazing, and the pressure from having to follow in those footsteps meant he was always stressed out and frowning, even in front of his retainers.” Mitsuki pulled back her finger from Yuuto’s forehead and held it up, speaking now as if she were reciting aloud from some reference book. “They say that the wrinkles on his forehead were stuck that way until the day he died.”

“Huh, really?” Yuuto stared at Mitsuki in admiration. “You know, I’m surprised you learned about something like that.”

Yuuto had been using the internet to do his own studying on the history of the Sengoku period, but this was something even he’d never heard.

“I read about it in a manga!”

“What, that was from a manga?!”

“Once I decided I was coming here with you, I read through all the Sengoku-related manga I could find.”

Mitsuki gave Yuuto a playful wink.

Joking aside, that sort of studying was probably part of the reason she was such a good wife. Of course, Yuuto thought her inner character had the most to do with it, though.

“Anyway, yeah, the point is that I was worried sick you were going to end up the same way, Yuu-kun. That’s why I’m glad you look better. Thanks, Linnea.”

“Oh, no, it was only because of your and Aunt Felicia’s efforts. As the youngest sworn sister, I will not presume to put myself above my place. I have every intention of always treating the two of you with the honor and the respect that you rightly deserve.”

“U-Uh, that’s a little too stiff and formal. You can just relax and take it easy with me, you know.”

“F-Forgive me. This is just how I am. Even my child subordinates tell me that I take things too seriously.”

“That part of you reminds me a bit of Big Brother Yuuto, though,” Felicia said with a smile.

“Oh, you’re right, it does!” Mitsuki chimed in.

“I-Is that true?” Linnea asked bashfully, seemingly happy to hear this.

The conversation blossomed from there, and the three girls enjoyed talking with each other for some time.

Yuuto was pretty much left to watch from the sidelines. However, it wasn’t an

unpleasant feeling for him just listening to them talk.

Their discussion was so lively and full of energy, so happy and full of color. Just listening to it made his heart feel lighter.

Yuuto began to let himself relax within this warm atmosphere, though just as he felt himself starting to zone out, Mitsuki suddenly turned to him.

“You know Yuu-kun, you really are one lucky guy, sitting here surrounded by three beautiful girls like us.”

He wasn't sure she should be brazenly using the “beautiful girl” label for herself, but it's not like she was wrong, either.

For Yuuto, though, more important than anything about their appearance was the fact that they accepted him for who he was, flaws and all. He had people who supported him, who understood him.

More than anything else, that was what he was grateful for. That was what made him happy.

He had all but given up on ever having that once, even going as far as telling himself that a solitary heart was a ruler's destiny.

Yuuto nodded slowly, a flood of emotions welling up within him.

“Yeah, you're right. I really am one lucky guy.”

“Wow... I'm really asking for it now. Maybe I'll spontaneously combust or something...”

In a dreamy, relaxed state, Yuuto muttered those words to no one in particular.

When people experience too much happiness, they become worried that terrible misfortune will soon follow, as if out of some kind of cosmic balancing of the scales. Such was human nature.

Though his remark on bursting into flames was no more than a joke, Yuuto did somewhat seriously wonder if indulging himself in this sort of thing might earn him a knife in the back.

“Don’t say things like that,” Mitsuki’s voice scolded from above him.

Mitsuki was busy cleaning Yuuto’s ear while he rested his head on her lap as a pillow.

“Big Brother, you are always working so hard for the sake of everyone else. I believe you *deserve* this much. Now, say ‘aaah.’”

Felicia brought a spoonful of something red to Yuuto’s mouth.

“Mm...” Yuuto opened his mouth and let her spoon-feed him. As he chewed, a distinct sour flavor spread throughout his mouth. “Huh, so this is what pomegranate tastes like.”

He’d been interested in trying it for himself since it had become one of Mitsuki’s preferred foods.

It was definitely very tart, but delicious too.

“Hngh! Hngh! Like this, Father?” Linnea called out, straining.

“Aahh, yeah, that’s good, just like that.”

As Yuuto felt her fingers press down against the muscles of his lower back, he responded with a sigh of pleasure.

“But are you sure it’s okay for me to have you do this? You are still technically a clan patriarch.”

“It’s fine! I wanted to do something to make you feel good, too, Father. ...And I would have felt left out if I was the only one without something to do. Besides, this is a fresh new experience for me, so I find it enjoyable.”

Linnea, raised as the noble daughter of a patriarch, apparently hadn’t had any experience in servicing someone else’s pleasure in this sort of personal way.

When the other two girls had started pampering Yuuto, she had just stood there flustered, unsure of what to do, looking like a frightened small animal—which, thinking back now, had been adorable in its own way.

“Okay, this ear’s done. Yuu-kun, flip over.”

“Mhm.”

Yuuto switched to laying on his other side, and Felicia and Linnea hurried over

to the opposite side of the bed.

It kind of made him feel like a king.

Of course, in reality, he *was* something pretty close to a king right now.

“Man, I think I totally get now why some kings fell completely into debauchery and started ignoring politics.”

This was dangerous. He needed to keep this kind of thing in moderation! But along with that strong sense of danger came the whisper of temptation, that it was fine to let things go just for today. Yuuto was definitely giving himself over to the latter.

“Don’t worry, Yuu-kun. If you ever do that, I’ll kick your butt so hard it’ll send you flying out of this room.”

“Tee-hee, in that case, I will take over after that, and drag you by the arm until we reach your office.”

“Th-Then I’ll, um, um... I’ll help you with your work! We’ll do our best together!”

“Hearing that makes me so happy, I think I’m gonna cry.”

Yuuto could only let out a wry chuckle at the thought of the three girls’ complementary promises.

It looked like he wasn’t going to be able to let his nation fall to ruin any time soon.

These girls really were way too good for him.

“Father, I’ve brought Hveðrungr to you.”

It was just past noon the following day, and Yuuto was enjoying a short rest in his favorite garden after lunch, when Sigrún’s voice called down to him in its usual crisp, military tone.

Yuuto opened his eyes and, sure enough, there he was. The masked prisoner stood before him, held in place by Múspell soldiers flanking him on both sides.

Of course, Yuuto was the one who had ordered him to be brought here.

Yuuto addressed the soldiers first. “Good work. Oh, and you guys can go now, except for Rún. Leave him here and return to your duties.”

“What? But, my lord...” one of the soldiers began. They all looked puzzled and concerned by this.

One could say that response was only natural. Right now, Hveðrungr wasn’t bound by any ropes. If the soldiers let go of him, he’d be completely unrestrained.

However, Yuuto waved a hand at them dismissively. “The man’s unarmed, and Rún’s here, too. It’ll be fine.”

“Yes, my lord!” Assenting to his command, the soldiers quickly saluted, turned on their heels, and left.

Hveðrungr waited until the soldiers were out of sight before he spoke.

“I see you’re enjoying life at the top, Yuuto. You look comfortable napping with my little sister’s lap as your personal pillow, so don’t get up on my account.” His voice was chilly, and he glared at Yuuto.

Yuuto’s lips curled into a grin. Without moving, he looked up at Hveðrungr and replied, “Despite everything, you’re still soft when it comes to Felicia, aren’t you?”

Hveðrungr was the type of man who was only ever interested in himself, but Felicia was the sole exception, the one other person towards whom he showed any attachment.

Being the perceptive man he was, he would surely have realized that his not being executed meant that his identity as Loptr was still being kept secret.

If he were to reveal that secret, it would jeopardize Felicia’s standing within the Steel Clan. In order to avoid that, he’d waited until the soldiers were gone before addressing Yuuto in such a familiar way.

Hveðrungr shrugged. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. So, did you have me brought out here just to watch a display of how intimate the two of you are?”

“Oh, no, but I was maybe hoping that the sight of how well we’re getting

along might put you at ease a bit, seeing as you're her family and all," Yuuto replied casually.

That reasoning was only an excuse, though. It was a calculated move: By starting with a loud and clear message that Felicia was on his side, it might help speed along the negotiation that followed.

"Hmph, what a transparent little trick. So exactly what did you plan to use Felicia to try and get me to do?"

Hveðrungr had seen through it effortlessly.

However, that, too, had been accounted for in Yuuto's calculations.

That was just how talented this man was—and *that* was exactly why Yuuto had sent for him.

"Have a seat, and let's talk." Yuuto lifted himself up, and the two of them took seats facing each other.

Yuuto stared into Hveðrungr's eyes for a moment, then took a long, deep breath before starting things off.

"So, I know it doesn't sound convincing coming from someone who was just taking a nap, but I'm a busy guy, so I'll save time and get right to the point. Would you be willing to swear the Oath of the Chalice with me again? Not as Loptr, but as Hveðrungr."

"What?!" The first response was a shout of surprise, but it didn't come from Hveðrungr. It was Sigrún, who was standing right next to Hveðrungr with her hand on the sword at her waist, watching him without letting her guard waver for a second.

Yuuto realized he'd probably forgotten to tell her anything beyond her orders to bring Hveðrungr to him in the garden.

Hveðrungr himself, by contrast, seemed completely calm.

"Well, I expected you'd have something like that in mind, but I have to wonder if you're not *out* of your mind. I *did* try to kill you, you know?"

"Y-Yes, that's right, Father!" Sigrún shouted. "He is too dangerous!"

“Not only that, when I made the attempt, I killed your sworn father. I should be the object of your revenge.”

“Absolutely true! And furthermore, even as Hveðrungr, he is a terrible war criminal who set fire to his own lands, inflicting suffering on his own innocent subjects!”

“If anything, I find it far more surprising that I haven’t been executed after all that, and that’s coming from me.”

“Yes, it’s exactly as he says! Father, offering your Chalice to him should be out of the question!”

With each statement from Hveðrungr, Sigrún offered her unwavering agreement.

It was clear she was being completely serious, and speaking out of real concern for Yuuto’s safety, but...

“Pfft.”

Yuuto couldn’t keep himself from cracking up just a bit at this scene.

“This is *not* a laughing matter, Father!”

“Yes, if it’s a joke, it’s certainly in poor taste.”

As Sigrún made a rare display of open anger, Hveðrungr folded his arms next to her and made a show of nodding solemnly.

He was clearly playing around with her, taking advantage of her totally serious and honest personality.

He’d known her since they were both children, and it seemed he also knew all the easiest ways to tease her.

“...Big Brother, I’m afraid I must say I am opposed to this as well. This man doesn’t show the least bit of repentance for his actions.”

Felicia hadn’t so much as cracked a smile during the back-and-forth between Sigrún and Hveðrungr, and she wore an expression of grave concern.

Felicia rarely ever spoke up in such firm, clear disagreement with Yuuto on anything.

She had experienced her own share of suffering due to all of her brother's many crimes. She surely couldn't help but think of what would happen if he were allowed the chance to commit them again.

Yuuto understood those feelings, but he also couldn't afford to back away from this.

"I told you yesterday, that's exactly why I need him. It's because he's so shameless; the kind of person who never regrets the immorality of his own choices."

The people close to Yuuto all had their own quirks, but most all of them were *good* people.

Skáviðr was a great example of this. Through his role as public enforcer of the law, including the delivering of capital punishments, Skáviðr took on the burden of the darker, uglier necessities of Yuuto's work. In order to accomplish the goal of protecting the weakest citizens under fair laws, he willingly performed his role as a sinister, hated character. In actuality, Skáviðr was a man of great kindness, if a bit socially ungraceful.

Personally, Yuuto appreciated the good people he surrounded himself with, and enjoyed their company. But as the ruler of a powerful nation, there was something he *lacked* with only people like that.

"Alas, this brat is not capable of making plans with me."

This famous Chinese historical quote was attributed to Fan Zeng, the elderly strategist and adviser to Xiang Yu of Chu. He supposedly made this remark lamenting his master's tendency to always give in to sentimentality at the expense of logic.

Yuuto now felt like he understood the feelings behind those words.

Up until this point, thanks to the introduction of weapons and tactics that far surpassed the standard for this era, Yuuto had been able to use the power of that superiority to force victory in all of his battles. However, from now on, they'd be fighting under even harsher conditions than ever before.

As Sun Tzu wrote, *"All warfare is based on deception."*

In order to be victorious in the conflicts ahead, Yuuto needed wily, underhanded strategies that would ruin his enemies—he needed the mind of someone like Hveðrungr.

“As it happens I’ve just had my wedding ceremony, and my new wife is pregnant, so it’s easier to dole out pardons, too,” Yuuto continued.

One very old tradition throughout history was the lightening of sentences or granting of pardons for prisoners when a ruler or person of high status has a happy occasion.

One could say this was the perfect timing to release Hveðrungr from his imprisonment.

“Still, we cannot know when he might betray us again...” Felicia began.

Yuuto cut her off. “It’d be too much of a waste to lose out on making use of someone this talented over a little reason like that.”

Yuuto had tossed aside Felicia’s real grounds for concern as “a little reason like that,” as if it were a minuscule thing.

Both Felicia and Sigrún were stunned speechless, their mouths hanging open.

Yuuto wasn’t being hyperbolic, though. He *truly meant* that it wasn’t a big deal.

There was no real telling how much time they had left until Yggdrasil sank into the ocean, yet here they were hopelessly surrounded by enemies on all sides.

Nothing should be off limits, not even working with the hated man who killed my sworn father. How can we afford to fight this war without taking advantage of every available resource? That was how Yuuto truly felt right now.

A good example of this stance could be found in Sengoku period history with the famed Oda Nobunaga himself. Shibata Katsuie and Matsunaga Hisahide were both generals who switched sides and fought against Nobunaga, but they were also very talented. Nobunaga forgave them on this basis and allowed them back into his ranks.

Yuuto himself wasn’t aware of it, but this was exactly the sort of quality befitting a great ruler.

That being said, the two girls were still not convinced.

“Certainly, even I must admit this man has great talents, but I would say that’s exactly why he’s so dangerous,” Sigrún said. It was rare for her to be this insistent.

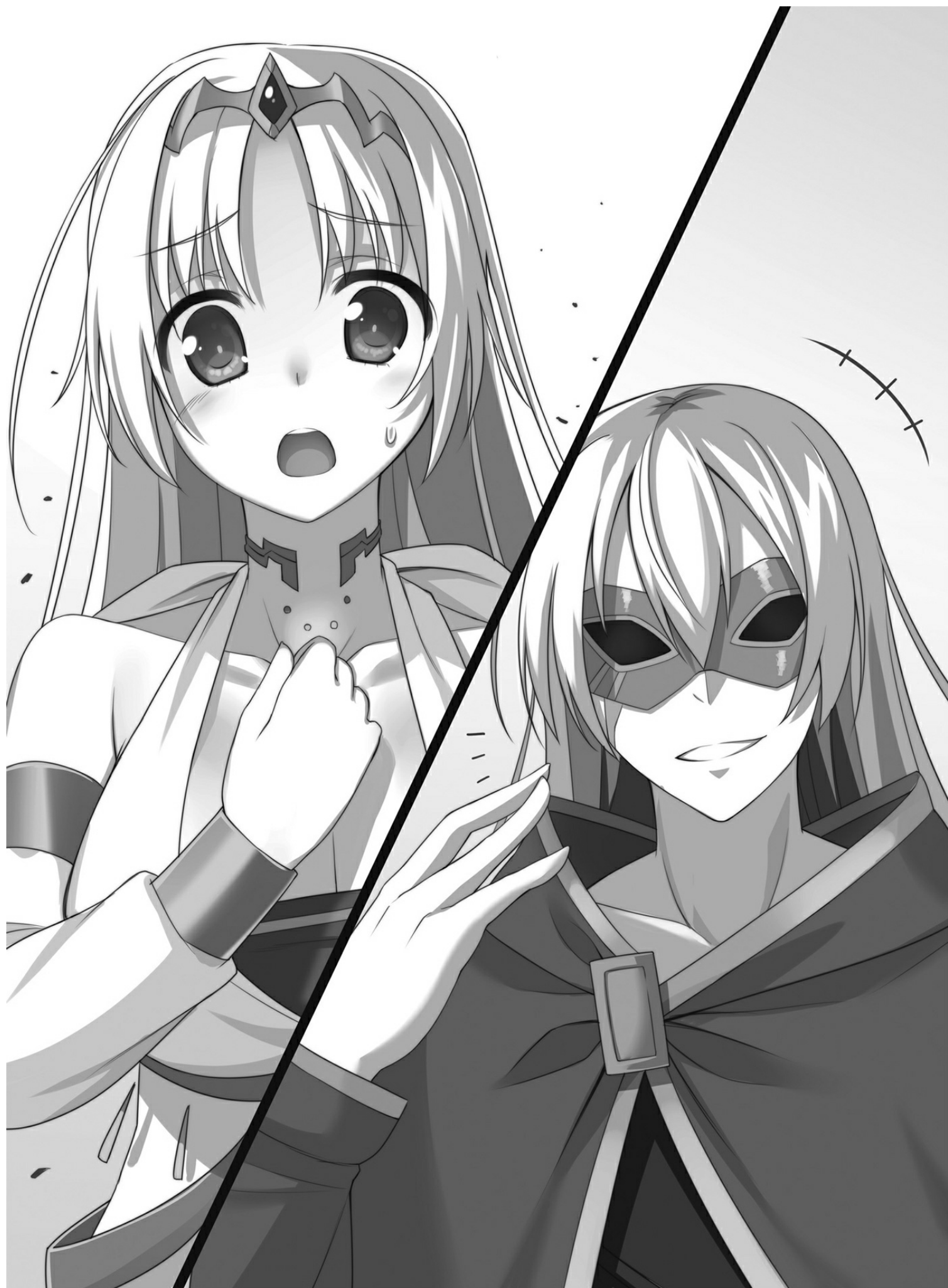
“If he ever does try to betray us again, you can just cut him down where he stands,” Yuuto asserted, in a voice that was low and chilling.

In truth, not wanting to kill the man who was once his sworn brother was still a part of Yuuto’s personal feelings. However, if the time came and it was necessary, he fully intended to follow through—even cut the man’s head off himself if so required.

Ordinarily, Yuuto was a mild-mannered and sincere person, but when the situation called for it he had no problems detaching from his own sentiments and doing what had to be done.

“A wise man changes his mind, but a fool never will.” This was one more way in which Yuuto possessed the nature of a true king.

Felicia and Sigrún remained silent, their breaths taken away by the strength of Yuuto’s spirit, but Hveðrungr chuckled, seemingly enjoying himself.



“Heh heh, knowing the naïve little thing you were just three years ago, it’s honestly like I’m staring at an entirely different person.”

His grit and ability to withstand this pressure was certainly what one would expect from the mastermind who took over the Panther Clan and raised it into a powerful nation capable of invading large clans in no more than a year.

“I would’ve never been willing to serve under the you from back then, not for anything, but as you are now, I’m not unwilling to consider taking your Chalice.”

“How insolent. As if you’d receive any greater offer!”

“Truly so. Why, there are more people who wish for the honor of receiving Big Brother’s Chalice than there are stars in the sky!”

Felicia and Sigrún immediately latched on to Hveðrungr’s self-important answer.

They were both zealous when it came to their belief in Yuuto, so they couldn’t restrain themselves from protesting in offense.

Yuuto himself, however, was another story. He slapped a hand against his thigh and smiled happily.

“All right, so you’ll accept, then! That’s a big help.”

He was the sort of person who didn’t care at all about whether people spoke to him humbly or respectfully. That was why he so easily ignored Ingrid’s bursts of uncouth language, or Kristina’s deliberately cutting remarks and attitude.

“You’re getting ahead of yourself. You still haven’t told me any of the details about this new Oath of the Chalice, you know.”

“Hm? Oh, right, that’s true. Well, I obviously can’t make you a child subordinate. It’ll be a sibling oath. After all, officially speaking, you’ve already relinquished the position of Panther Clan patriarch to Skáviðr and retired from that family.”

“Yes, I suppose I couldn’t expect to be allowed back into the main family line,” Hveðrungr agreed, with a sardonic smirk.

Under the clan system of Yggdrasil, each clan was structured in imitation of a

family, with the oaths sworn on the Chalice forming the power relationships in that family.

As the center of that clan family, the patriarch and his or her direct child subordinates were the center of power for the clan's governance.

Sworn siblings of the patriarch were given their due honor and respect as "uncles and aunts" of the child subordinates, but they were "branch family," not part of the main family line at the clan's core. They were a step removed from any input in clan policies or affairs.

A sworn sibling couldn't advance their rank within the main family, so it was a career dead end.

"It might not be the best replacement, but I've prepared a position for you as the commander of our Independent Cavalry Regiment."

Sigrún gasped. "Father, I think that may be giving him far too much power!" she said, raising her voice. "We should at least wait and see if we can truly trust him first..."

Yuuto shook his head, refusing to hear her protest once again. "When a person gets ahold of power, that's when their true desires come to the surface. If we try to test him without giving him any power, we'll never really know anything for sure."

Over the last two years, Yuuto had seen all too much how power and authority changed people.

He knew now that trying to judge people *before* that change wouldn't help him make the right decisions.

It was easier and faster to give someone power and watch what they did with it.

"Besides," Yuuto continued, "The Independent Cavalry Regiment is meant to act as a totally detached military force. Leading them requires exceptional decision-making abilities, to be able to adapt to changing conditions and new information. There's no one better suited for that role than this guy."

"Hm, judging by the name of this group, I'd guess they're made up of the

Panther Clan riders taken prisoner at the Battle of Körmt River,” Hveðrungr mused.

He’d already deduced the identity of their soldier base. His perception was as impressive as expected.

“That’s right. We also have the ones who surrendered and agreed to submit to the Steel Clan at the end of our campaign against you. It’s about three thousand men all together.”

“Ohoh.” Behind his iron mask, Hveðrungr’s eyes narrowed.

When it came to combat skill, Panther Clan riders were the best of the best. They were perhaps the most skilled fighters in all of Yggdrasil.

If command of their regiment was given to Hveðrungr, who was already familiar with leading them in battle, they could outclass a force of ten thousand normal infantry.

The strength of ten thousand troops was on par with the military might of one of the Ten Great Clans.

Giving such a powerful position to a former enemy commander, and one who had held a personal vendetta against Yuuto for such a long time, seemed like a break from sound logic.

However, Yuuto wasn’t just granting Hveðrungr this power without any forethought.

Hveðrungr had once been the leader of an army of over ten thousand such armed cavalry, had forged an alliance with the Lightning Clan, had taken advantage of Yuuto’s absence to push the Wolf Clan and its allies to the brink of destruction—and was then completely defeated by Yuuto with seemingly no effort.

That memory was surely burned vividly into his mind.

Yuuto’s calculation was that the man wasn’t fool enough that a *mere* three thousand riders would tempt him into trying something funny.

“Very well. I’d started getting bored of self-reflection in that tower cell, anyway. I’ll take the offer.”

“Great! I’ve already got the Chalice prepared. Felicia.”

“...Right.” For once, Felicia’s response was slightly delayed.

With body language that made clear she was doing this only reluctantly, Felicia fetched the Chalice and placed it in front of Yuuto and Hveðrungr.

“I wish you wouldn’t look so upset about this, Felicia,” Hveðrungr said, with a bitter smile.

“I don’t care.” Felicia turned her cheek and looked away.

Yuuto laughed. “Don’t treat him too cruelly, Felicia. Technically, he’s going to be your sworn younger brother now.”

“...!” Felicia’s eyes went wide. Apparently she hadn’t realized that until just now.

The way the Chalice oaths worked was that, traditionally, the first person to exchange the Oath of the Chalice with someone as a sworn younger sibling or child was “older” than those who came later.

Even discounting that, Felicia held the position of Leader of Subordinates, meaning she was in charge of managing all of Yuuto’s younger sibling subordinates.

“In that case, I will be as cold and high-handed with him as humanly possible.” Felicia stated, an icy expression upon her face.

“Haha, I gotta say, I can’t really picture you acting that way, Felicia,” Yuuto replied.

“What’s this?” Hveðrungr asked with a smirk. “You’re still putting on that innocent act around him?”

“Brother!”

“Whoa, now that’s scary.” Hveðrungr made a show of shuddering in a rather exaggerated manner.

And so, after two years, the Oath of the Chalice was once again exchanged between the two men, and they became sworn brothers anew.

“Father, I have prepared the documents declaring an order to make consecutive plantings. If I could have you affix your seal, please.”

“Lord Reginarch, regarding the issue in Gimlé’s western district...”

“Yuuto, there’s something I don’t really get about the design for the sails, can you look some things up for me?”

What awaited Yuuto after the renewal of his old relationship was an absolute mountain of work.

One thing after another piled in, mainly requests for him to make decisions on things before he headed off to war with the Steel Clan’s army and became unavailable.

In Yuuto’s absence from the capital, he would pass all authority regarding those tasks onto his second-in-command, Linnea, but it was perhaps only natural that everyone would wish for the decisions to come from Yuuto himself and not his representative.

Yuuto made sure to listen carefully and attentively to the people who came to report to or petition him, and he handed down his decisions one after another. However, no matter how many issues he got through, there seemed to be no end to the number of people seeking an audience.

It was rather late at night by the time the last of them left.

“It’s finally over—!” Yuuto cried out in triumph, throwing his hands into the air.

“I’m terribly sorry about this, Big Brother,” Felicia said. “There are still some unread messages.”

“Gah, there’s still some left, huh?” Yuuto drooped over his desk.

Learning there was still work left to do just as he’d thought it was over and done with was the most exhausting feeling.

“First is... Oh, this is from Ginnar, whom we have serving as an envoy to the Flame Clan.”

“Ah!” At the mention of the name, Yuuto sat up with a start. “Hurry and read it!”

Right now, obtaining a personal meeting with the Flame Clan patriarch was of the utmost concern for Yuuto.

He of course had no intention of downplaying the importance of his approaching showdown with the Lightning Clan or letting his guard down, but to Yuuto it wasn't really a war about settling a score with an equal opponent, as much as it was about suppressing and controlling a weaker one.

The fact was that with Steinþórr gone now, Yuuto didn't feel much of a real threat from the Lightning Clan.

On the other hand, not only did the Flame Clan patriarch's true identity concern him; there was also the fact that the results of their meeting and dialogue held the key to breaking the alliance of enemy clans and their encirclement strategy.

Every day felt like an eternity waiting for a response back from the Flame Clan.

“‘Inform my grandfather Lord Reginarch Yuuto of the Steel Clan. I am Ginnar, Wolf Clan Executive Officer.’” Felicia began reading the message, starting from the formal introduction.

Ginnar had originally been a trade merchant who had traveled to a great many lands across the breadth of Yggdrasil, and Yuuto had invited him to join the Wolf Clan in recognition of his exceptional mercantile skills.

Presently, Yuuto was making the most of the persuasion techniques and eloquent speech skills Ginnar had honed from his long years of sales experience, by sending him as a diplomatic envoy to the Flame Clan capital of Blíkjanda-Böl. Yuuto had tasked him with opening negotiations to work toward establishing an alliance between their nations, and an exchange of the Oath of the Sibling Chalice between the Flame Clan patriarch and Yuuto.

“‘Firstly, congratulations on your wedding. As your sworn grandchild, I wish to express my deep joy, as well as my best wishes for happiness and good fortune for you and your wife for the many years to come. Along with this message, I have included a fine emerald that I came across in this region. Please accept it, that you might be able to offer it to Lady Mitsuki as a gift.’ ...Ah, here it is.”

Felicia retrieved a tiny cloth sack from within the package, and when she turned it upside-down, a deep green gemstone tumbled out and into her palm.

“Oh, my, it’s quite large,” Felicia remarked, her eyes widening. As a woman, she of course did not lack an affinity for beautiful gemstones.

“Just what I’d expect from a former merchant, the guy really is tactful. But I wish he’d hurry and cut straight to the important stuff.”

“Please don’t say that, Big Brother. You should make sure to give this gift to Big Sister Mitsuki. I’m certain she will love it.”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it, but right now I need you to keep reading.”

“Of course. ‘Now then, Lord Reginarch, I shall report on the task you gave me regarding the Sibling Chalice alliance with the patriarch of the Flame Clan. Presently, the Flame Clan patriarch is personally commanding his army in the field, and as it is not yet known when he will be returning to the capital, it has proven very difficult to pin down potential dates.’”

“Hah, so I’d guess the emerald was probably his way of trying to make up for that,” Yuuto said with a wry grin. He was tossing and catching the gemstone in his hand and rolling it around in his palm as he listened to the message being read.

Normally, Yuuto didn’t really like this sort of bribe-like gesture.

Ginnar was also a good judge of people, so he should be aware of that fact.

And so, instead of offering the emerald to Yuuto as a gift directly, he had banked on his knowledge of Yuuto as a devoted husband to his beloved wife, and framed it as a gift Yuuto could give to her.

He really was tactful.

“‘Grandfather, it pains me greatly to make someone as great and honorable as you have to wait like this, but negotiations have shown promise. The Flame Clan patriarch has expressed a great interest in you and seemed open to the idea of swearing the Oath of the Sibling Chalice. Please look forward to more good news soon.’ Well, now!” Felicia sounded delighted as she finally finished reciting the message.

“We can’t expect too much from that, though. This was written before the imperial subjugation order against the Steel Clan came out, remember?”

Messages sent back and forth with the Flame Clan had to go through Lightning Clan territory.

The subjugation order had been issued four days ago. That region was also still in the midst of active conflict, so messengers would have to be careful of the routes they took. Yuuto hadn’t confirmed the sending date yet, but it clearly would have had to have been sent even earlier.

“Still, it *is* definitely good news, no doubt about that.”

“Yes. Judging by this message, the Flame Clan patriarch seems willing to accept the offer of becoming your sworn brother.”

“Yeah. All that’s left is to pray that the subjugation order hasn’t changed his mind on that.”

“Erm, that does remind me of something I wish to ask. Do you think our invasion of the Lightning Clan might harm the Flame Clan’s opinion of us?”

“Hm? ...Oh, I see. You mean that whole, ‘all you have to do is occupy them, no need to engage’ business.” For a moment Yuuto didn’t get her question, but soon he remembered what she might be referring to.

Just before the Flame Clan launched their invasion of the Lightning Clan, they had sent the Steel Clan a message requesting aid. It had basically said, “*No need to actually engage them. Just occupying them is enough.*”

Felicia was asking if this meant the Steel Clan invading now would be going against the wishes of the Flame Clan.

“I am of course aware that the Steel Clan is already a large regional power, strong enough to conquer its immediate neighbors, and we have no obligation to adhere to the demands of someone from a foreign clan, with whom you have not exchanged the Oath of the Chalice... However, this is also someone who somehow killed *Steinþórr* so easily, and that troubles me... I believe that we should do our best not to agitate him.”

“Hmm, well, I understand your point there. In our circumstances, making such

a powerful nation into our enemy really would spell the end of the Steel Clan.”

“Yes...”

“I certainly don’t intend to provoke anybody. I’m doing this because I’ve got a plan.”

“If that is the case, then I understand.”

“Well, we’ll still have to find out how it goes once things get started.” With a wry chuckle, Yuuto drooped his shoulders.

Even he had to admit it was a real tightrope-walk of a strategy.

But, he had to believe in the choice he’d made.

The die had already been cast.

Being pressed above them.

“I see, so it would seem the Steel Clan plans to begin a campaign against the Lightning Clan.”

The Sword Clan patriarch Fagrahvél muttered these words to himself as he glanced over the message in his hand.

It was one day after Yuuto had made his proclamation of said campaign to his council of patriarchs.

Additionally, information about it had not even gone public within the lands of the Steel Clan, yet, though Fagrahvél had no way of knowing that.

For the world of Yggdrasil, where messages were still most often carried on foot, this information had reached him at a preposterous speed.

“More intelligence by way of that stupid geezer, my lord? Just what sorts of eyes and ears does he possess to come by such things? It is just so bizarre...”

Fagrahvél’s trusted aide Erna spoke with open distaste in her voice.

The so-called “stupid geezer,” Imperial High Priest Hárbarth, somehow pulled in information from all throughout the realm while himself remaining in the imperial capital Glaðsheimr. He obtained information from far-flung locations before people actually *out there* managed to do so.

This was why people feared him as Skilfingr, the Watcher From on High.

He had learned of Steinþórr's death well in advance of everyone else, as well. By the time that same information had been caught by the Sword Clan's intelligence network and then worked its way up to the top, ten whole days had passed.

Erna was far past being merely surprised by these developments; they sent an eerie chill down her spine.

"Huh, maybe we shouldn't say anything rash, then, you know? He could be listeniiiiing."

That overly-relaxed voice conveying an unsettling idea belonged to Bára.

Like Erna, she was one of the Maidens of the Waves, a group of nine Einherjar belonging to the Sword Clan. Bára's easygoing, lilting way of speaking belied a truly cunning and resourceful mind, which earned her favor as another one of Fagrahvél's most trusted companions.

"Oops!" Erna quickly covered her mouth with both hands and glanced around nervously.

She could see no one there besides the three of them.

Even using her heightened Einherjar senses, she couldn't feel anyone's presence.

But she still didn't feel like she could lower her guard. That was how scary that old man was.

"Anyways, let's forget about that old man for a minute, okay? He is our ally right now." Bára paused, then added, "...Even if it's only for right now." Her words carried their own tinge of venom.

Behind the scenes, Fagrahvél and Hárbarth had been locked in an ongoing political struggle to determine guardianship rights for the divine empress, Sigrdrífa.

And the struggle had been bitter, indeed, especially in the face of Hárbarth's overwhelming information advantage.

It would be quite impossible to tell them not to hold any personal enmity

towards the man.

“Indeed,” Fagrahvél said, nodding. “Right now, our focus is the Steel Clan.” He turned his gaze to a map mounted on the wall.

It was ironic: In order to plot out his victory over the Steel Clan, he was using a map made from the substance known as “paper,” produced by and purchased from the Steel Clan.

“Even though there’s an imperial subjugation order out against him, he certainly doesn’t show any restraint, huuuh? As soon as he found out the Battle-Hungry Tiger was dead, he went in for the kill. I guess even if they change their name, a wolf is still a wolf, wouldn’t you agree?”

“From what I saw of him, he didn’t really seem to me like someone that was eager for war, though. Rather, he was very, well, ‘harmless’ isn’t quite the word. Mild-mannered, I would say.”

“I think it’s better to judge by actions than by appearances, though. The Wolf Clan used to be a tiny clan up against the Bifröst mountains, on the verge of disappearing, and now two years later they’ve got more military power than even we do, riiight?”

“You’re right about that. Her Majesty has issued the subjugation order, after all, so I’m sure all along he was just planning to use her for his own nefarious ends. He nearly had me completely fooled, too.” Erna gritted her teeth in frustration.

Erna already knew her share of people who approached with friendly smiles, behind which they hid calculating and vicious schemes—that included the girl in front of her now.

Those kinds of people had a sort of liar’s stench that she hadn’t gotten any hint of from Yuuto, but this was someone strong enough to build up his clan into a powerful nation in the matter of just a few short years. It just meant he must have been more skilled than her.

As Erna thought back to her memories of him, she got more and more irritated at the thought of him.

“My liege! The perfect opportunity to attack them is now, while they’re busy

invading their neighbor. Let us show them our might, and smash them all at once!”

“Erna, you knooow, your strong suit is how you’re so serious and honest, but could you use your head a bit more, pleeease?”

“That sounds like you’re really insulting me! Just because you are the older sworn sibling, that doesn’t give you the right to just say anything and everything about me...”

“I’d say nine-to-one odds this is just them baiting us, thooough.”

“Huh?!” Erna’s eyes went wide as saucers, and she looked at Bára and Fagrahvél in turn.

Fagrahvél responded with a wry smile and a chuckle. “Most likely, yes. This is a man whose people revere him as the second coming of a god of war. I can’t imagine his being so thoughtless as to rush to move his troops around and expose himself right after an imperial subjugation order was issued against him. He’s got something set up and waiting, and he’s doing this troop movement in order to flush out his enemies and pull them into a vulnerable position, I’d say.”

“I think he’s also counting on it being easy to figure out that this is bait, too. There’ll be some enemies who get cautious and hold back, and others who would think it’s a good opportunity to go after him. So he can make his enemies react in different ways and get all mixed up, you knooow?”

“That sounds about right. He really is a shrewd one.” Fagrahvél gave a heavy, serious nod, crossing his arms.

“Th-Then, we should hold off from attacking right now?” Erna asked nervously. She was the only one of the three not keeping up with the flow of the conversation.



“No, it’s why we *will* attack now,” Fagrahvél stated firmly.

Bára nodded in agreement. “Riiight? I think that’s the right call too. If he’s trying to make us, his enemies, act differently from each other and get mixed up, then you could turn that around. He doesn’t want us to all do the same thing.”

“Indeed. And the art of warfare lies in doing exactly that which your enemy least wants you to do. The subjugation order against them was only issued just recently. They may already have started preparations to counter us, but they shouldn’t have prepared anything significant just yet. In which case, we should attack right now, with *all* of our available forces attacking at once, without granting them any time to recuperate and ready themselves. We should take them out in one fell swoop!”

Fagrahvél slammed his fist into the palm of his other hand.

As it happened, Fagrahvél and Bára’s analysis had indeed revealed the intent behind Yuuto’s troop movements. It had led them to take the course of action that would be the absolute worst for Yuuto, out of all the possibilities that he predicted.

In the days before Yuuto arrived in Yggdrasil, the strongest military leaders in the realm had been summarized by the following phrase: “*The Battle-Hungry Tiger hunts in the west, the Beautiful King holds council in the east.*” And it was no empty phrase: Fagrahvél’s reputation as one of the two greatest military commanders in the realm had been proven time and again.

However, he and his aide had still made one crucial mistake in their analysis, and that was that *this, too, was all part of what Yuuto had predicted.*

The Sengoku period provided the examples of the imperial edict against Oda Nobunaga, and the Nobunaga Encirclement Strategy. Studying that history, and the flow of events in that period, had made a huge difference.

Of course, that knowledge and foresight still didn’t change the fact that this situation was most certainly undesirable for him.

The curtain was threatening to rise on a great war that would encompass all of Yggdrasil, a war perhaps worthy of the name Ragnarok.

ACT 4

The Steel Clan capital, Gimlé, was a bustling city full of energy and life. As the powerbase of Suoh-Yuuto, the great hero-king who led his nation from victory to victory and strength to strength, it was flourishing.

Traders frequented the city in pursuit of its glasswares, paper, and gritless bread, and there was no end to the people from neighboring territories flowing into the city in search of employment.

The region's population was seeing explosive growth, and yet law and order remained securely in place. The law was applied to all equally, and violators were captured and punished with all due haste. Thanks to public safety being preserved in this way, the denizens of the city walked the streets with hopeful eyes and bright smiles.

However, on this day, a heavy atmosphere held sway over the streets. The cause of it was the crowd of ten thousand soldiers gathered in the plaza in front of the city's second hörgr to the goddess Angrboða. With armor donned and spears in hand, they stood waiting, ready to depart at a moment's notice.

It wasn't just in Gimlé. In the Horn Clan capital of Fólkvangr, a separate invasion force of six thousand men was gathered and ready.

Sixteen thousand soldiers mobilized in total, with officially announced numbers claiming they were twenty-five thousand strong. That made this combined army even bigger than that of the Steel Clan's utilizable forces during its campaign to subjugate the Panther Clan.

"Even with this, we're still not mobilizing all of our possible forces," Yuuto muttered to himself. "The Steel Clan sure has gotten big." He looked down on his troops from where he stood atop the altar platform in front of the hörgr.

The campaign against the Panther Clan had sustained heavy financial costs for the Steel Clan, but it had also led to a huge gain in their ability to mobilize a greater number of soldiers.

With that difference in numbers, it should *look like* they were sending all of their troops to invade the Lightning Clan.

“Thanks to that, it looks like our bait’s gonna bag us a lot of fish.”

Yuuto had already gotten a message from Kristina: *“Sword Clan moving to mobilize army.”*

When the þjóðann Sigrdrífa had left the imperial capital and gone on her secret journey, the two Einherjar that had accompanied her had been from the Sword Clan.

Considering that connection, it was perfectly natural that the Sword Clan would be the first to respond to a subjugation order issued directly from the þjóðann herself.

Aside from them, there were suspicious movements in the Hoof Clan, Northern Panther Clan, Cloud Clan, and Fang Clan as well. It looked like things were progressing just as Yuuto had initially feared, and those clans had all been forming an alliance in secret first, before the subjugation order was issued.

“It is just as you predicted, Big Brother. You are as amazing as always.”

“I was hoping I’d turn out to be wrong, though,” Yuuto said, and let out a bitter chuckle.

He’d hoped that by deliberately choosing this early timing to move his troops, it would trigger suspicion in his enemies and make them less likely to work in tandem. It looked like his hopes hadn’t panned out, though.

This war was going to be a hard one.

Yuuto let out a long yawn. “Well... it certainly is boring having nothing to do now but sit around.”

He sat inside a pavilion tent set up within his temporary field headquarters.

The Steel Clan’s main force had crossed the Élivágar River and invaded Lightning Clan territory. They were currently positioned surrounding one of the enemy’s main defensive strongholds, Fort Dái.

The fortress had around two thousand soldiers manning it, and they’d immediately assumed a full defensive lockdown. It looked like they intended to

resist capture with everything they had.

The offensive quickly settled into a stalemate that had lasted for three days now.

As far as siege warfare goes, three days was still very early into the game, but even so, having to sit around waiting that long still left a person with a considerable sense of boredom.

Of course, there was Yuuto's secret weapon, the trebuchet. He could use that to create openings in the walls, then have his men force their way in and capture the place.

However, the trebuchet needed to be built on-site, which required first getting hold of the necessary materials, like heavy lumber. That would cost a lot of extra labor and time out here. Additionally, forcing a melee battle with the enemy in the fortress would, naturally, inflict a certain amount of casualties upon his troops.

In *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu wrote, *"Victory won through battle is an example of poor strategy. Victory won without need for battle is an example of good strategy."* There was a long, hard war still ahead for Yuuto's armies, and he didn't want to lose good men here.

And so, he'd gone with the standard in offensive siege warfare: encircling the enemy stronghold to cut them off, and calling for their surrender.

"With such a huge difference in the size of our forces, I'd have thought they would've surrendered by now," Yuuto muttered, shaking his head in disappointment.

The enemy's morale was still high. It looked like it would take quite some time to push them into considering surrender.

"Indeed, they are quite resilient. It is surprising, considering that they cannot count on any reinforcements." Next to Yuuto, Felicia tilted her head quizzically.

According to Kristina's reports, after Steinþórr was killed in battle near Fort Waganea, his second-in-command Röskva had taken up the mantle as the next patriarch of the Lightning Clan. Röskva had declared that the Lightning Clan was now fighting a war of revenge, in honor of their slain patriarch, and that had

raised morale quite a bit—but not enough to overcome their military disadvantage.

The Flame Clan had already pushed their way right up to the area just outside the Lightning Clan capital, Bilskírnir, and the Lightning Clan was putting everything they had into holding the line there. They were in no shape to send soldiers out here to the eastern end of their territory.

Traditionally, locking up completely during a siege defense was a strategy predicated on the assumption that allied reinforcements would be coming to break the siege. Felicia must have found it puzzling that the fortress soldiers here would choose resistance when they could not expect any such assistance.

“It means they *are* counting on reinforcements,” Yuuto said. “Just an assumption, but this could be proof the Lightning Clan already established their secret alliance with the other clans, and the Steel Clan Encirclement is already fully underway.”

“I see. Then, they believe that if they can hold out for long enough, we will eventually be forced to pull our forces back home.”

“Yeah.” With a bitter grimace, Yuuto nodded.

This was a pretty frustrating situation. He couldn’t afford to be wasting time here.

“And it’s not like I could break them by singing songs, either.”

“Erm... By singing songs?” Felicia repeated Yuuto’s words, unsure of their meaning.

Yuuto let out a wry chuckle. “Oh, it’s a story from history back in my world. There’s an incident where an army had surrounded an enemy that was holding out defensively, and in order to bewilder them, started singing the songs of the enemy’s homeland.”

“Why would they choose to sing the songs of the *enemy* homeland?” Felicia asked. “Would that not increase enemy morale instead?”

“Not at all, as it happens. The enemy soldiers were cut off and losing the war, you see. They were fooled into suspecting that their nation might have already

fallen, such that even soldiers from their homeland were being added to the ranks of the troops surrounding them. In that case, there was no hope of rescue ever coming. It crushed their will to fight.”

“Aha! I see now!” Felicia nodded several times, impressed.

It was an anecdote from records of the Battle of Gaixia, Xiang Yu’s final stand against Liu Bang, and it was the origin of the Chinese idiom “surrounded by Chu songs.” This phrase became a popular literary metaphor in Chinese and Japanese for the state of being hopelessly cut off and surrounded by enemies, with no prospect of help from allies.

“We, on the other hand, only just advanced into Lightning Clan territory. I can’t imagine that these guys are going to be fooled into thinking we’ve already conquered other parts of their country, right?”

“That is true. Still, we cannot simply leave this stalemate as it is, can we? Shall I send out orders to begin construction of trebuchets?”

“Switching to that strategy now feels like admitting we lost with this one, though. Plus, it’s like, if we were going to use those, then we should have been using them from the start. The three days we’ve already used up would’ve been for nothing.” Yuuto frowned, crossing his arms.

Yuuto was of course half-joking with this argument. He knew full well that it was wrong to let military decisions be influenced by such personal feelings.

He also knew, however, that he didn’t want to waste even more time here if he could avoid it.

“In that case, I have an idea—a rather good one, at that.”

The voice that suddenly entered their conversation came from the former patriarch of the Panther Clan, the man who was currently the commander of the Steel Clan’s Independent Cavalry Regiment—Hveðrungr.

In order to make maximum use of their superior mobility, the basic plan for the Independent Cavalry Regiment was to have them based in the Gimlé area, from which they could quickly move to assist other regions that were in danger. However, this particular operation was an exception, in which they were accompanying Yuuto and the Steel Clan’s regular army. It was partially because

it was their first time being deployed into real combat, and also because this would serve the purpose of displaying larger numbers to the enemy.

“Oh, you do?” Yuuto’s eyes narrowed with interest.

This was, after all, the man who had developed one successful counter-strategy after another against the Wagon Wall, a military tactic Yuuto had taken from three thousand years in the future.

If someone like him was saying he had a good idea, it was something worth hearing about.

“Heh, it’s going to look like we’re doing nothing more than cruelly taking out our frustrations on them, though,” Hveðrungr said, with a self-deprecating chuckle. However, when he proceeded to describe his plan, Yuuto slapped a hand on his knee and grinned.

“I knew you’d deliver! I can’t think of anyone better than you when it comes to conjuring up such nasty schemes.”

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?”

“It’s full-throated praise, Brother.”

Indeed, Yuuto had been hoping for exactly this sort of thing out of Hveðrungr. It was why he’d brought him back into the fold as his subordinate.

“Taaamayaaa!”

Yuuto shouted a word unfamiliar to the people around him, stretching out the syllables, and immediately afterward there was a huge *KABOOM!* that shook the dark night air, as powerful as the crack of thunder from a lightning strike at close range.

He was making use of the tetsuhau, the explosive weapon that he’d previously used during the Steel Clan’s campaign against the Panther Clan.

The tetsuhau bombs were useful at creating panic in enemy soldiers, so he’d brought a reasonable supply of them along with his army this time, too. Right now, he was launching them into the enemy’s fortress—using a smaller version of the trebuchet.

While it certainly didn't have the capacity to launch 100-kilogram rocks like the larger model, it could launch light bombs about the size of a person's head. Most importantly, it could be constructed using fewer materials, and took only about half a day to assemble.

"Kaaagiyaaa!"

Another shout from Yuuto, and another explosion. The bright flash of light was reminiscent of the fireworks back home in Japan. Indeed, though the others would not recognize it, Yuuto was shouting out the traditional calls made during a Japanese fireworks show.

Yuuto had researched and developed the bombs as a strategy to counter the horses of the Panther Clan's cavalry, but—and this was something Yuuto himself didn't know yet—they also had been used in Chinese history as an effective siege weapon, where they were known as "thunder crash bombs."

There were passages describing their use in the *Xu Zizhi Tongjian*, the Chinese text compiling the works of several historians on the history of the Song, Liao, Jin, and Yuan dynasties. One such passage read: *"The sounds of their thunderous roar carry for a hundred li. They burn to ash the land across half a mǔ. Their force pierces through even iron plating."*

The *li* and *mǔ* were ancient Chinese forms of measurement for length and area, respectively. One *li* was just about 500 meters, and one *mǔ* was about 667 square meters.

If one were to interpret this account just as it was written, then it would mean huge explosions that could be heard from fifty kilometers away in all directions, capable of incinerating patches of land three hundred square meters in size.

In such Chinese documents there was a tendency to exaggerate descriptive numbers for effect, so one couldn't simply assume they were accurate as-is, yet even numbers a tenth of these would be indicative of significant destructive power.

In Yuuto's case, he was in his command tent quite a distance away from the blast zone, but even there he could feel the shockwave from each explosion physically hitting his body.

It would surely be unbearable for the people being hit with that sound and force at such close range.

“Heh heh, it seems the lot manning the fortress have worked themselves into a fine turmoil,” Hveðrungr observed, his face alight with a wicked smile.

And it was exactly as he said: They could hear the sounds of soldiers screaming and crying beginning to well up from within the walls of the fortress.

They would have likely heard rumors about the novel weapon that had enabled the Steel Clan to defeat the Panther Clan riders, but that was incomparable to experiencing the effects of such a weapon firsthand. It would be, both figuratively and literally, a shock to their system.

Someone native to the 21st century would likely have the benefit of exposure to fireworks, but these soldiers were dealing with something they’d never experienced before in their lives. And what’s more, these bombs were designed to be much louder than any fireworks, and when they exploded, they threw out bits of iron and glass shrapnel.

And those terrible weapons were being suddenly unleashed in their midst in the darkness of night, in a situation where they’d spent days surrounded and isolated by the enemy army.

The Lightning Clan soldiers soon fell into a state of total panic and terror.

“Big Brother, now is the time.”

“Yeah, I know. ...It’s kind of weird having *you* address me as your big brother too, you know.”

“Heh, frankly speaking, it feels repulsive to me—even more so than I expected. Still, this is the way things work in our world; I’ve no choice but to resign myself to that.”

“Hey, you don’t have to go *that* far,” Yuuto said, and with a sardonic grin, he turned to hand out his next set of orders.

If he kept this up, continuing to launch bombs at the enemy periodically, it would prevent them from getting any sleep, break their spirits, and rob them of their will to fight. It would likely bring them to the point of surrender in due

time.

However, there was another stage to Hveðrungr's plan.

"Damn them! They *always* have to spring some outlandish surprise on us!"

Berthold, the Lightning Clan general in charge of Fort Dái, spat the words out bitterly.

He was one of the higher-ranking officers of the Lightning Clan, stationed there with the important mission of safeguarding this border fortress.

He was a man of forty-two years, and there was no concealing the fact that he wasn't as physically spry as he used to be, but he'd been in active service since the days of the patriarch before Steinþórr, and he had an abundance of experience from the many battles he'd seen over the years.

And yet, in his long life, he'd never seen anything like this.

"Pull it together, men! Get control of yourselves, already!" Berthold shouted at the top of his lungs. "Sure, the sound may be terrible, but these things can't actually hurt you as long as they don't hit too close to you!"

He'd kept himself from panicking, and in only the short span of time since the start of the attack, he'd calmly analyzed the nature of the tetsuhau bombs. Such a feat showed this general was indeed worthy of the task of commanding Fort Dái, the Lightning Clan's front line of defense against the Steel Clan.

However, his shouts were drowned out by the even louder explosions of the bombs, and so his message wasn't getting through to his troops.

They really were infuriating weapons.

And what's more, while the surprise and impact of their terrible noise was temporarily panicking his soldiers now, that wasn't even really the whole problem. Berthold's experience was why he realized the *true* threat they posed.

"If they can hit us with these every day and night, my men won't last. They'll crack before long..."

Holding a fortress against a siege was a lengthy contest of endurance, one that could last months.

The key to victory in such a protracted standoff was in how well one could maintain the morale of one's soldiers. Or, put another way, in how effectively one could keep them fed and rested.

In spite of other factors, a person's mind could still remain surprisingly resilient as long as he or she was adequately fed and rested.

Of course, Berthold's enemies had so far put in the usual effort to try and prevent his troops from resting: assaults on the gate at irregular intervals, sounding loud war gongs, and the like.

This, however, was something on a completely different level. These loud explosions would force a person out of even the deepest sleep.

If they were defending a large, walled city like Bilskírnir, then holing up in buildings in the center of the city might be enough to shield his men from the noise, but there was no escaping from it in a fortress of this size.

If this kept up for even three more days and nights, the lack of sleep would rob them of their spirit and their ability to focus on anything. They'd be totally spent in both body and mind.

"What should I do? Should I surrender? No, that's..."

A soldier suddenly rushed into the room. "S-Sir, I have a report!"

"..." Berthold paused, letting out a long breath, before inquiring, "What is it?"

On the battlefield, one must maintain a calm mind at all times. Berthold knew that was the secret to survival in war, and so whenever he received a report, he always made sure to take a deep breath and steady himself before listening to it.

And yet, he was still so surprised by the next words out of the soldier's mouth, he was forced to question if he'd heard them correctly.

"Th-The main gate has been breached, and the enemy has taken control of the entrance!"

"Wha...?!" Berthold found himself shocked speechless... but only for an instant. "Tch! So those damn thunder-makers were a diversion!"

He'd immediately grasped the crux of the situation, proof of just how

excellent a commander he was.

While the Lightning Clan soldiers were busy running around panicked thanks to this new weapon they'd never dealt with before, the Steel Clan soldiers had used a battering ram to break open the fortress gate.

Ordinarily, the loud sound and vibrations from the impact of the battering ram would have immediately alerted his men to the enemy's attempted break-in, and they would have been able to pelt them with a hail of arrows and drive them off. However, the loud explosions had made it so they didn't realize it was happening, and they'd let the enemy finish their assault.

"So the Steel Clan's little brat has pulled one over on us yet *again*..." Berthold sighed, his shoulders drooping.

In actuality, the one who had come up with the plan was not Yuuto, but the Lightning Clan's erstwhile sworn ally Hveðrungr, though Berthold would of course have no way of knowing that.

"The Steel Clan has also delivered us a message calling for our surrender, sir."

"...I see."

The fortress gate had been breached, and the area around it was entirely under enemy control. With the difference in troop numbers between them, there was nothing Berthold could do to salvage the situation.

If he chose to keep fighting, it would only end in a one-sided slaughter of his men.

"All right. I'll surrender. Tell them I don't care what happens to me, but in exchange, I ask them to spare the lives of the soldiers in here..."

Naturally, when Yuuto learned of this resolute, honorable decision, he had nothing less than the utmost respect for it, and thus, Berthold's life was spared.

Just like during the previous campaign against the Panther Clan, the tetsuhau proved an invaluable and effective weapon, and the Steel Clan's invasion continued at a comfortable pace.

Riding the momentum from their capture of Fort Dái, the Steel Clan army had

soon advanced as far as Fort Gashina, which they also captured with no bloodshed.

With that, the Steel Clan had, with little to no actual combat, recaptured all of the territory taken from them by the Lightning Clan in their previous war.

To most everyone in the Steel Clan, this was an occasion for triumph and joy. However, there was one exception...

“Rrgh, dammit! This is totally different from what I expected!”

In the main courtyard of the fortress, a girl named Hildegard yelled out in frustration, clearly not enjoying this situation.

She was a young girl with braided hair, and eyes filled with an impudent, brazen aggressiveness that left a strong impression on those who met her gaze.

Partially due to her young age, at first glance she looked like someone who didn’t belong on a battlefield, but she was in fact a fully-fledged member of the Múspell Special Forces, said to be the most elite unit of the Steel Clan army.

Of course, she had only just exchanged the Oath of the Chalice with the Múspell commander Sigrún the day before they went on the march, so she was its newest member.

Hildegard’s anger stemmed from one point in particular, which she shouted aloud:

“Just when am I going to get a chance to prove myself?!”

Ever since the invasion of the Lightning Clan began, she’d done nothing but wait on standby in the rear. She hadn’t gotten the chance to fire a single arrow yet.

In order to achieve her goal of receiving the Oath of the Chalice from the great Reginarch Yuuto, the man she most admired, she needed to put some achievements to her name and earn some glory during this campaign.

“Aaaugh! Damn it all—!”

All the girl could do about her pent-up anger at this moment was to throw it outwards, shouting at the moon shining in the night sky.

Thwack!

“Oww!” Hildegard let out a cry of pain as a fist hit her on the top of her head.

“Quit howling in the middle of the night, you’re making a racket!”

The owner of both this voice and the fist which preceded it was none other than her direct superior and new sworn parent, Sigrún.

Sigrún’s slender arms were by all appearances too pretty and fragile to swing a heavy sword without great difficulty, but the truth was quite the opposite: She was an Einherjar, and a punch from her carried incredible strength.

“Oww... I’m... I’m sorry...” Hildegard clutched her throbbing head as she apologized, tears forming in her eyes.

Back when she was still a trainee in the Sigrún Family, she had stirred up some pretty serious trouble, but she was totally obedient now.

Sigrún was overly protective when it came to Yuuto, but she didn’t show a whit of mercy when it came to her own sworn children.

The iron fist that Hildegard had taken to the head just now was a typical punishment for mistakes, and something she’d had to deal with every day. Actually, a whack to the head like this was, if anything, on the lighter side of things.

And this same demon-hearted commander had also told her, “*You have great potential.*” Over the long month of brutal training that followed, even a problem child like Hildegard had been whipped into shape in terms of attitude as well.

“I’ll show you! One day I’ll get you back...!”

And yet, she still often let slip declarations like these. It showed that, in her heart, she still did not truly submit herself to others.

She was an Einherjar herself, and terribly prideful in her strength. It all came together to create quite the personality.

“Did you say something?” Sigrún asked coolly.

“No, nothing!” Hildegard immediately snapped to attention and shook her

head.

The speed of her reaction spoke to how well she'd been "trained."

"Fine, then. Actually, I also found myself agitated and unable to sleep. Here, let's go for a bit." As she said this, Sigrún tossed Hildegard a wooden sword.

She was also holding one for herself. Apparently this had been her intention from the start.

"Agitated? *You*, Mother?" Hildegard's eyes widened slightly as she caught the sword.

Sigrún was always so stone-faced, never seeming to show any emotional reaction. Some people even called her the "Frozen Flower." Being too agitated to sleep was the sort of problem a rookie would complain about; coming from her mouth, it sounded like it had to be some kind of joke.

"I've got too many bad memories of this place," Sigrún said, frowning bitterly.

Hildegard had spent every day with Sigrún for a whole month, and this was the first time she'd ever seen her wearing an expression like that.

But she had an idea as to its cause.

"Oh, right, here at Gashina is where the Wolf Clan suffered a miserable defeat, right?" she asked.

Back then, Yuuto had been commanding the Wolf Clan army, but he had suddenly vanished into thin air, having been forcibly transported back to his world beyond the heavens. Hildegard, of course, only knew the public story, which was that Yuuto had suffered injuries which left him unable to continue directing the army.

The Wolf Clan army had been thrown into disorder by this sudden event, and in that moment of weakness, they were defeated by the allied armies of the Panther Clan and Lightning Clan. The Wolf Clan lost their general and hero Olof, and afterwards, both the cities of Gimlé and Fólkvangr were surrounded and besieged by the enemy. All of that hardship had sprung from the battle at this hated place.

Indeed, that would naturally leave bitter memories. This cold-blooded warrior

was still a human woman, after all. It was perhaps no wonder she'd been unable to keep calm tonight.

Sigrún nodded at Hildegard's question. "That's right. It was a full moon that night, too... And so, I'm here to relieve some of this frustration. You've got energy to spare tonight too, don't you?"

Sigrún moved her wooden sword into form, ready to spar.

When she'd spotted Hildegard out here howling at the moon, she surely must have seen her as the perfect outlet for her pent-up stress.

"You really want to do this in the middle of the night?"

Futile though it likely was, Hildegard made an attempt at resistance.

"Tonight's the full moon. You have the powers of the wolf within you—this is more than enough light for you, right?"

"...You know me well."

Wolves were known for their exceptionally good night vision, and Hildegard's rune was Úlfhéðinn, the Wolfskin. True to its name, it was a rune which gave its bearer the strength and abilities of a wolf.

She could fight no less easily now than in daylight.

"But, I always get so tired when I fight you, Mother."

"You say that, even as you bring your sword to the ready. I like that about you."

A menacing aura billowed up from Sigrún's body, like bloodlust bleeding into the air. It sent a sharp chill down Hildegard's spine.



Great, there it is right off the bat... the Múspell commander's famous "Aura of Ice!"

The Múspell Special Forces, recognized both from within and without as the strongest, most elite military unit within the Steel Clan, were made up entirely of soldiers fully prepared for actual combat.

All of their training was designed to simulate real combat situations.

This powerful aura of killing intent that Sigrún pressured her soldiers with was meant to train them not to be overwhelmed by the atmosphere of an actual battle, so that they could make use of their full abilities without trouble. It was one more way she took care of them as their sworn mother.

As such, she of course was not truly fighting with an *actual* intent to kill. Even so, it was the sort of threatening presence befitting the strongest warrior in the clan, and far more overpowering than anything an average soldier could project.

Furthermore, it seemed even more dangerous than usual tonight. Perhaps that was because of the unpleasant memories she'd recalled.

It would be more than enough to paralyze a rookie soldier, and perhaps even an experienced one would find his legs locking in place.

It was such incredible pressure. But...

"Don't insult me!"

Hildegard brushed it aside easily and sprang forward, stepped into range, and brought her wooden sword down in an overhead swing.

Sigrún blocked it easily.

Their swords clashed again and again. After more than ten exchanges, Sigrún spoke up again.

"Such spirit and grit, unlike anything I'd ever expect from a rookie. And that's even though I'm putting twice as much killing intent behind my attacks as I usually do," she said with a chuckle.

She continued to parry Hildegard's attacks as she spoke, despite the fact that

Hildegard was pouring all of her strength into each swing.

It was that composure of hers, that *ease*, which really grated on Hildegard's nerves.

Not wanting to be outdone, she shouted back, "Twice as much? Do you hate me that much?!"

"I just said I liked you earlier, didn't I? I'm actually quite fond of you."

"It really doesn't seem like that to me!"

"Really? Even though I dote on you every day? Just like this, for example."

"This isn't 'doting,' this is hazing!"

Hildegard was somehow barely managing to fend off Sigrún's attacks right now, but throughout her training so far she'd been struck by that wooden sword of hers too many times now to count.

Sigrún always held back just enough not to inflict any real injuries, but she still inflicted pain. A whole lot of pain.

If she had such a high level of skill that she could adjust her strength precisely to the point of inflicting pain without injury, then Hildegard wanted nothing more than to scream at her to stop her attacks before they hit at all.

In fact, she *had* screamed that at her once before.

Sigrún's response? "People don't really learn from their mistakes unless they experience pain."

When she heard that, Hildegard had screamed, *Don't give me that crap!*—deep down in her heart.

"Oh, that attack just now was pretty good," Sigrún said. "It had more power behind it."

"Of course it did!" Hildegard shouted back.

After all, she'd put a whole month's worth of pent-up anger into it.

"Yes, it looks like you've gotten much better. It's getting to the point where I'll have difficulty going easy on you."

“Hah, it won’t be long before I surpass you!”

“I’m looking forward to that.”

“Wha—?!” Hildegard cried out as she was suddenly thrown off balance. Just as she had been going for another overhead attack, an unexpected force had been *added* to the arc of her sword swing.

With her center of gravity off, she stumbled, and before she could recover, her unsteady feet were swept out from under her, and she fell flat on her rear.

“Ow!”

“It looks like it might be a while after all,” Sigrún mused, and pointed the tip of her sword right at Hildegard’s nose.

It was unquestionably Sigrún’s win.

“Ngh...!” Hildegard groaned.

“Come on then, another round. Get up.” Sigrún said.

“Yes, Mother!”

Hildegard stood back up immediately. It was a pretty submissive reaction on Hildegard’s part, but that was because she knew from training that a slow response would earn her a very physical reprimand.

“Now that I think of it, what about that power you used the first time we fought? You’re not going to use that?” Sigrún asked, tapping her wooden blade idly against her shoulder.

Hildegard grimaced upon recalling that occasion, then eventually sighed wearily.

“Right. You mean the Beast...”

Hildegard’s rune had one particular power that was different from other runes.

It unleashed the Beast that dwelled deep within her, and the Beast’s power was capable of increasing her physical strength and agility to incredible extremes, abnormal even by the standards of powerful Einherjar warriors.

“I’ve sealed that thing away...”

“Sealed away? That’s a waste. If you could learn to fully control it, it would make for a magnificent weapon for you.”

“I’d really rather not.” Hildegard’s face scrunched up even more.

It was true that unleashing the Beast would grant her incredible power, but it also robbed her of her conscious mind. It was a double-edged sword.

In her unconscious state, she’d attacked the reginarch, and even wet herself in front of him, a horrible experience that had made her want to crawl into a hole and die.

She never wanted to go through such a terrifying, humiliating experience again.

“Well, I suppose it’s true that if you can’t keep your mind about you, it’s too dangerous to use.”

“Exactly!”

“Then you just need to make *yourself* stronger. Now come on!”

“Yes, Mother!”

And their wooden blades clashed once more.

“Haah, haah... I lost *again*. Haah, haah... At least let me get one good hit on you!”

Lying on the ground flat on her back, her body splayed out wide, Hildegard complained in between her heaving pants.

Even after going through more than twenty rounds, Hildegard’s wooden blade hadn’t once even grazed Sigrún’s body.

“If you want it, then get better,” Sigrún replied, resting her wooden sword across her shoulders. “If you keep up this pace, then after another six months you should be able to win about one out of every ten.”

Sigrún wasn’t out of breath, but she *was* breathing a little more heavily than when they started, and there was sweat on her face.

Thinking back to a month ago, when she hadn’t been able to do anything to

upset Sigrún's cool, relaxed expression, Hildegard could see that she'd made some real progress. But even so...

"Another six months of brutal treatment, and that's all I'll be able to do...?" Hildegard muttered with a look of dismay.

It was as if an insurmountable wall was stretching out above her, impossibly high.

With all of her power, Hildegard still couldn't put up a real fight against this silver-haired she-wolf... and yet, it had taken Sigrún herself all of her strength and skill just to put one little scratch on the Dólgbrasir. Just how strong had *he* been, then? She couldn't begin to imagine it.

Then there was her wise and courageous reginarch, who had time and again easily fended off the Battle-Hungry Tiger, leading that monster around completely by the nose. And then the patriarch of the Flame Clan, who had apparently killed that same monster with no trouble at all. There were so many ridiculously strong people in this world.

When she'd awakened to her rune a month ago, Hildegard had been so sure she was unstoppable, that her strength would take her right to the top. Looking back on that now, she realized just how much her past self had been nothing more than a big fish in a small pond, ignorant of the people far stronger than her.

She was startled out of those thoughts by the sound of clapping. Still on the ground, she turned her head to look in the direction of the sound and saw...

"L-Lord Reginarch?!"

It was the head of her family and ruler of her nation, the person she viewed with all the reverence of the divine. She hurriedly jumped up to her feet, then dropped back to her knees and bowed her head low.

It felt like she always wound up looking weak and shameful in front of him. Once again, she felt like she wanted to crawl into the nearest available hole.

"Ah, no need for that," said the reginarch. "We aren't in public. You can be at ease."

Hildegard lifted her head. There he was, right in front of her. There was no mistaking his appearance, no mistaking his voice. It was the young man she'd held unending feelings of longing admiration for since she'd first laid eyes on him one month ago, and whom she could normally only view from afar.

Hildegard was happy, but also frozen stiff from nerves.

"I was watching your fight. You're that new recruit from back then, right? You're something else to be able to fight like that against Rún."

Hearing Yuuto speak of her in such impressed tones, Hildegard's heart welled up with joy, and she could feel herself breaking into a smile.

But Sigrún shook her head and cut in. "No, she's still too inexperienced."

You didn't have to say that! Hildegard thought to herself.

"Really? She's the first person I've ever seen fight so well against you."

At Yuuto's statement, the girl standing behind him nodded. "Yes, I agree. Why, I think even I would have difficulty doing that well."

Hildegard would be the first to admit that her sworn mother Sigrún was an exceedingly beautiful woman, but this other girl was no less a pinnacle of beauty in her own right.

"If even Felicia says so, then she's strong for sure. All right, then. Rún, I want to borrow this girl and a few more capable members of the Múspell to serve as my bodyguards for a bit, is that all right?"

"...!" Hildegard felt her heart skip a beat.

Being Yuuto's personal guard meant she'd be serving close by his side. If she made a good impression on him, it would definitely boost her chances of moving up the ranks. And more than anything, there was the possibility this could lead to her getting invited to his bedchamber.

Hildegard's heart danced just considering all the potential outcomes swimming through her mind, but once again her superior's voice cut in and threw cold water over everything.

"I have no issue with it, Father, but... must you take *this one*?" Sigrún asked, in a decidedly negative tone.

Of course, Hildegard was in no position to speak up and argue right now.

“Yes, there’s no doubt as to her strength,” Sigrún continued, “but I worry about allowing her to serve at your side when her behavior is still...”

“I will behave! I promise I will be quiet and behave to the best of my ability!” Hildegard shouted. With such a once-in-a-lifetime chance hanging on the line, she hadn’t been able to keep silent after all.

“It’s as you can see,” Sigrún stated flatly. Hildegard had only served to prove her right.

Certainly, butting into a conversation between two superiors was the height of inappropriate behavior. Hildegard inwardly screamed in anguish at how thoughtless she was.

“But bodyguards, Father? What for?” Sigrún asked quizzically.

With that question, Hildegard also realized something was off.

As the commander-in-chief, Yuuto was situated in the safest, most protected position in the army formations, and he already had strong, skilled fighters like Felicia close by to guard him.

In that sense, his request for even more bodyguards was quite troubling.

“Could it be that assassins have infiltrated our ranks?”

Sigrún’s guess was based on the fact that, in this situation, that was the only method left for the Lightning Clan to attempt to turn things around.

However, Yuuto waved his hand, dismissing the possibility. “Ah, no, nothing like that,” he said. “I actually just got a message from the Flame Clan patriarch asking to meet and speak with me in person. He said there was no need to get tangled up with a whole formal meeting ceremony; that since we were close by, we might as well see each other.”

ACT 5

“The sanctuary dedicated to Fjörgyn, in the village of Stórk?”

“That’s right.”

Yuuto nodded in response to Sigrún, who was thoughtfully mulling the situation over.

Stórk was a tiny village located about two days south of Gashina on foot.

The land there wasn’t fertile, and the village wasn’t on any trade routes, either, so the area had almost no strategic value.

The Flame Clan had chosen that place solely because it was exactly halfway between the current positions of the Steel Clan and Flame Clan army encampments.

As the two nations were not currently bound in alliance through the Oath of the Chalice, it would be a rather difficult and risky endeavor for either of the two rulers to enter into the other’s military camp.

And so a neutral location a small distance away from either army’s formation was chosen as the meeting spot.

“I’m trying to negotiate friendly relations with him, so if I take too many soldiers with me, it’ll end up looking like I’m trying to intimidate him. That said, we’re still pretty deep into enemy territory.”

“I see, so that is why you wanted a small number of elite fighters.” Sigrún nodded in understanding.

After taking control of Fort Gashina, the Steel Clan forces had driven off all of the Lightning Clan soldiers in the surrounding area, but it was still reasonably possible that there were some left in hiding.

However, if Yuuto were to take a large entourage of soldiers with him to the meeting place, then even though he was trying to establish an alliance with the Flame Clan, they could potentially see it as some kind of threat towards them.

“I understand the situation now,” said Sigrún. “It is true that it would be a bit worrisome with only Felicia as your personal guard. I shall also—”

“No, Rún, I want you to stay here and take command of the troops. I don’t expect any nasty surprises, but you never know what can happen in war.”

“Wha—?!” Sigrún’s eyes went wide with shock.

Apparently she’d simply assumed she would be going with Yuuto as well.

“Think about it—you’re the only one here right now that I can entrust that role to,” Yuuto said.

He wasn’t lying, either.

Because of the currently unfolding situation with the subjugation order and the alliance of enemies encircling the Steel Clan, Yuuto’s subsidiary clan patriarchs weren’t here with him. They’d sent representatives dressed as lookalikes; the actual patriarchs had returned to their respective territories to prepare their defenses.

Out of Yuuto’s subordinates traveling with this army, Sigrún was the highest ranked, and she also had a record of military accomplishments that meant no one could deny her qualifications for command.

“Erm, but...” Sigrún trailed off, searching for an argument.

She was still very overprotective when it came to Yuuto.

He could tell just looking at her how worried she was for him.

“Mother, please rest assured that I will protect the lord reginarch without fail!” Hildegard shouted, and thumped her fist against her chest with pride and confidence.

Sigrún’s brow furrowed. “You’re only making me even more worried for him.”

“Hey! You said just a moment ago that you had no doubts about my strength!”

“Yes, I said that, but that doesn’t mean I’m comfortable leaving Father in your hands...”

“Rrgh.” Hildegard’s expression tensed with irritation. “Mother, there is no one

better suited for this escort mission than I am! In fact, I think I would be a better choice than even you!”

“*What?*” In response to Hildegard’s incredibly bold statement, Sigrún fixed her with a sharp glare.

The Múspell Special Forces were lauded as the strongest fighters in the Steel Clan, and many of its members were on the hot-headed side. Sigrún was used to dealing with such people, and she was usually willing to let a crude remark or a lapse in manners slide, but it seemed that having someone claim to be better than her right to her face was enough to raise her hackles a bit.

However, Hildegard did not flinch at Sigrún’s glare.

“As an Einherjar gifted with the powers of the wolf, my smell and hearing are far superior to those of the average person!” she exclaimed. “Detecting the location of enemies is among my greatest talents!”

“Oh?” Yuuto seemed to perk up with interest.

For an escort mission like this one, combat skill was of course important in the event of an ambush, but even more crucial was the ability to detect the presence and location of enemies.

Sigrún might be the strongest warrior in the Steel Clan, and a master with the sword, but if she were attacked by an ambush of a hundred soldiers, she would be hard-pressed to both defend herself and protect Yuuto at the same time.

On the other hand, if Hildegard had the superior powers of detection that she claimed to, she would be able to sense approaching hostile forces before they were close, giving Yuuto’s group a much greater chance to escape before any attack took place.

It was obvious which one of them would be the better pick for this mission.

“Hm.” Yuuto looked thoughtful for a second. “Wait, but just a minute ago, weren’t you surprised by the fact that I was here?”

“Th-That was because I was completely focused on my training with Mother!” Hildegard protested. “I could never attempt to fight her while sparing any attention for anything else.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Yuuto said with a nod, seemingly convinced.

“As your escort and guard, I would be able to devote my full attention solely towards our surroundings, keeping watch for threats.”

“Hm... Don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m a little uncertain that I can just take your word for it when it comes to your senses of hearing and smell. I’d prefer some way of confirming just how good they are.”

“I understand. For one, I can tell that Aunt Kristina is over there.”

Hildegard pointed her finger in what seemed like a random direction.

“...”

There was no response, and a few moments of complete silence followed before Sigrún spoke up.

“I’m fairly sure she’s not there. At the very least, I can’t sense her.”

“I am afraid I do not sense her, either,” Felicia added.

The two other Einherjar had come together in agreeing that Hildegard was wrong.

“Wait! Please, come out here already and show them!” Hildegard shouted into the darkness. However, there was no sign of anyone out there, much less anyone approaching.

Yuuto grinned, and spoke in the direction Hildegard had pointed toward. “Kris, this is an order. If you’re really there, come out.”

Knowing how Kristina could be, he was certain that if she was there, she wouldn’t reveal herself, so he decided to help Hildegard out a little.

It was partly because he felt bad for her in this situation, but also because he honestly wanted to get an assessment of how good her detection abilities really were.

The twins Kristina and Albertina were masters at concealing their presence. There was no one who could compare to them in terms of stealth.

If Hildegard had been able to detect Kristina’s presence out in the darkness despite that, then she was without any doubt the perfect choice to take along

with him to the upcoming meeting.

Yuuto waited to see the results...

Kristina did in fact appear, from the direction Hildegard had pointed. She had a slightly sullen expression—perhaps being discovered had nicked her pride somewhat.



“This is the first time I have ever been detected from that distance,” she remarked.

“Wow,” Yuuto said, raising his eyebrows. “If even you’re admitting that, her abilities really are quite impressive.” He was genuinely impressed.

He chose not to bring up the fact that Kristina had been eavesdropping on them.

That sort of thing was just part of who she was.

“All right then, that settles it.” Yuuto turned to Hildegard. “I’ll be taking you with me as part of my escort. I’ll be counting on you.”

“Yes, my lord! You can count on me!” Hildegard’s reply was loud and spirited.

Yuuto nodded, satisfied, and turned back to Kristina.

“Speaking of which, I’ll tell you since you’re here, Kris. You’ll be accompanying me too.”

“Well, yes, naturally.” Kristina’s response was almost aggravatingly nonchalant, as if she’d just heard something obvious.

One of Kristina’s special abilities allowed her to dampen the presence of another person and make them harder to detect, as long as she was holding their hand. It was another invaluable ability to have at the ready to assist in avoiding danger, and her reaction was likely because she was already fully aware of that.

“And also... I think I’ll take him with me, too.”

Yuuto turned around and pointed at the “him” in question, who was currently lying by a nearby campfire, relaxing.

Sigrún seemed surprised by this. “*Him*, Father? But, I suspect he might cause even more offense than Hilda.”

“Wha—Please don’t use me in that comparison! I should think at the very least I am better than *that*!”

“Don’t worry, it’ll be fine,” Yuuto said with complete confidence, the corners of his mouth curling up into a smile.

“If what I know about the Flame Clan patriarch is right, he’s gonna love it.”

“So this is Stórk, huh?” Yuuto whispered to himself.

He was looking up at a collection of houses surrounded by a wooden fence.

This setup was a common method of protection for smaller settlements in Yggdrasil: The area surrounding the houses would be fitted out with crude barriers—deep moats or tall fencing made from thick wooden posts.

Yuuto had heard that this area in particular was plagued by wandering brigands and gangs of bandits from the nearby mountains. As such, he’d readied himself for trouble, but in the end nothing had happened along the way, and they’d reached their destination without incident. It was a little anticlimactic, but it was better to think of it as a good sign for things to come.

Hildegard seemed pretty nonplussed about the situation, though.

“...D-Do I h-have the honor of addressing Lord Reginarch Yuuto, of the Steel Clan?”

They were met at the village entrance by a young man who trembled with fear as he spoke to Yuuto.

Yuuto was the lord and ruler of a large and powerful nation in the midst of rapid expansion, so it was only natural some people might have that sort of fearful reaction to him, but clearly with this man, that wasn’t the only thing he was afraid of.

His gaze kept darting from Yuuto down to what he was riding on. It seemed he couldn’t ignore it for even a second.

That was exactly what Yuuto had been hoping for, and inwardly he chuckled to himself. However, he made sure not to show that emotion on his face.

“Yes, that’s right.” Yuuto maintained a cool expression and gave a single, dignified nod.

Throwing aside part of his cape, he extended his right arm to display the iron knuckle-guard he wore on his right hand.

In Yggdrasil, iron was a precious metal more valuable than gold, and even

though Yuuto had introduced iron-refining techniques and made it a bit less rare among his people, it still wasn't the kind of thing any ordinary thief could get his hands on.

The emblem of the Steel Clan was engraved into it as well, making it definitive proof of Yuuto's identity.

"Can you let me pass?" Yuuto asked.

"Y-Yes," the man stammered. "I was told of your arrival. P-Please, come in. Lord Nobunaga is already waiting for you at the hörgr."

"All right. Everyone, let's move." Yuuto turned his head and gestured to the group behind him, and they filed through the gate into the village.

As they made their way toward the hörgr, they crossed paths with local villagers, who each time froze up and began shaking with fear.

Yuuto was accompanied by a total of nine guards: Felicia, Kristina, Albertina, Hildegard, and five of the most skilled members of the Múspell Special Forces.

All of the girls were, of course, stunningly beautiful, and as for the men, they were not only well-built, but each of them was ruggedly handsome as well. It wasn't a large retinue, but it was still quite showy.

However, in terms of showiness, there was one more member of Yuuto's party to whom the rest all paled in comparison, and it was with his help that Yuuto stunned the residents of the village as he made his way through it.

"Bwah hah hah hah!"

Standing inside the hörgr, the sanctuary hall devoted to the goddess Fjörgyn, the man watched as the Steel Clan patriarch and his party made their approach up the entrance stairs, and he burst out in delighted laughter.

The man had black hair, an exceedingly rare trait in Yggdrasil.

He was already over the age of sixty, but both his body and his expression were filled with a vibrant energy that made him look like he was still in his early forties, or perhaps even his late thirties.

His name was Nobunaga. He was the patriarch of the Flame Clan, which ruled

over the Helheim region—and which now controlled the southern half of Vanaheimr as well.

“Well, well, it seems he is just as curious a man as the rumors describe! What a truly dramatic entrance!”

First off, the bold act of bringing along only a scant nine attendants was magnificent and worthy of praise. And furthermore, half of those were women, and three of them were even children!

The men in his group were also all incredibly handsome, and ordinarily just the beauty displayed by this group as a whole would have been enough to demand his wide-eyed attention.

However, at this particular moment, Nobunaga did not pay them any mind at all.

“I’ve heard the empire of Ming has tigers, and that the land of India has a long-nosed, giant creature called an elephant, both beasts not found in my homeland. And I have heard of the distant land called Africa, where the people all have skin as black as a bull’s, just like my old retainer Yasuke. I’ve heard the intriguing claim that the world is round like a ball. But this—this creature is something the likes of which I have only heard of in tales of myth!”

Nobunaga’s gaze was fixed on one point: The white-furred creature atop which Yuuto was riding.

“I have never seen such a gigantic wolf before, either,” remarked his second-in-command Ran, who was staring wide-eyed in shock.

Indeed, in terms of its shape, it looked exactly like a giant wolf.

This creature was a garmr, a species of beast native to the Himinbjörg Mountains far to the north, where they were both feared as predators and revered as sacred creatures by the local residents.

As a powerful warlord and ruler, Nobunaga had received a great variety of rare animal trophies as tribute, but a wolf large enough to carry a grown man on its back was something even he had never laid eyes on.

Furthermore, there was the very fact that this creature had been tamed into

serving as this man's transport in the first place. That was surprising in its own right.

"Heh heh heh, when I first met my father-in-law at Shotokuji, I put on my own show and gave him a surprise, but I must admit this puts even that to shame!"

Nobunaga closed his eyes for a moment, replaying the memory of that long-past day.

It was back when he was but a man of barely twenty years of age.

He'd received a request for an in-person meeting from his father-in-law Saito Dosan, the ruling lord of Mino. Nobunaga had brought with him a retinue equipped with firearms, which were still quite rare at the time, and he'd done things like change into different outfits in between different parts of his visit. His actions had been unusual and served to baffle onlookers during the visit.

But this display by the Steel Clan patriarch now had left *him* feeling like the one on the receiving end of such mischief.

"Okay, we absolutely *have* to make these negotiations succeed."

Sitting atop Hildólf, Yuuto felt a chill grab hold of him.

When he reached the sanctuary, there were at least several hundred Flame Clan soldiers waiting there for him. It required a good deal of courage to keep moving forward when there were only less than ten on his side.

However, that wasn't really the biggest issue at this point. He'd made the decision to show his peaceful intentions by bringing only a small number, and he had the resolve to follow through on that.

No, what sent chills down Yuuto's spine were the *weapons* they had.

Their long, cylindrical barrels shone with a black, metallic luster, and they were all held ready against the shoulder, pointed up towards the sky.

He'd seen pictures of them in movies and in manga—they were Japanese-style matchlock guns.

"So he's got more than a hundred of them..." Yuuto whispered to himself.

It was impossible that Nobunaga could have brought that many of them here with him directly from the Sengoku period, which meant he must have had them constructed here in Yggdrasil.

In other words, this couldn't be the end of his supply, and he had the capacity to produce even more.

By contrast, even though Yuuto had access to knowledge and information from the modern era, he wasn't going to be able to master the manufacturing of guns overnight.

Even in the example of the matchlock firearm first being introduced to Japan, they had actual models on hand to dissect and analyze, and it still took the ruler of Tanegashima two years before he could successfully produce his own.

Even with the famously talented blacksmith Ingrid working at his side, two or three years wouldn't be enough. It would take many years of experimentation before he could produce enough guns to catch up to the Flame Clan. And during that time, Yggdrasil would sink into the ocean.

Up until this point, Yuuto had always fought his enemies while maintaining an overwhelming technological and strategic advantage over them. But now, if he were to make the Flame Clan his enemy, for the first time he'd be forced into war with an opponent who outclassed him in terms of weaponry.

Yuuto couldn't keep himself from gulping nervously.

But in the very next moment, even the threat of the matchlock guns vanished completely from his mind, as if blown away by an explosion.

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Lord Patriarch of the Steel Clan. I am the patriarch of the Flame Clan, Oda Nobunaga."

"?! " As the man's eyes met Yuuto's, Yuuto felt his heart pound loudly in his chest, like a hammer dropping on an anvil.

The *force* behind Nobunaga's gaze was unbelievable.

It was clear the Flame Clan patriarch wasn't glaring at him threateningly. In fact, his expression was actually rather welcoming and friendly.

And yet even still, Yuuto felt overpowered. It was as if he could see a vast

ocean stretching out behind the man, and he was struggling not to be pulled into it.

This guy... There's no mistaking it. It's really him.

Previously, the person from whom Yuuto had felt the most overwhelming, threatening pressure had been Steinþórr, the former patriarch of the Lightning Clan. But compared to this man standing in front of him, that twin-rune monster now seemed like nothing more than a meek little kitten.

Yuuto dismounted Hildólfr and gave a light bow before introducing himself.

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance. I am the Steel Clan patriarch, Suoh Yuuto. It is an honor to meet face to face with the most famous hero in the history of my homeland."

"Oho? Your *homeland*, is it?" Nobunaga narrowed his eyes and looked more closely at Yuuto's face. "I had my suspicions when I received that katana as a gift from you. So, you are from Nippon as well, then?"

Nobunaga chuckled. He likely found a bit of pleasure in meeting one more of his fellow countrymen here in this strange land so far away from Japan.

For Yuuto himself, he'd learned that one of the greatest historical heroes from his homeland, someone whose example he respected greatly, had come to this world of Yggdrasil and risen to rule over one of its greatest nations. Even though that situation was now a potential threat to him, Yuuto couldn't help but feel happy, too.

"Yes, that's right. However, I came here from an era more than four hundred years in the future from yours."

"Is that so? Then I suspect you will have quite a few interesting stories to tell me."

And so, the first meeting between the two fellow Japanese men began on an amicable note.

"So, that little bald rat really defeated my enemies, did he?"

Nobunaga listened to Yuuto's account with great interest, at times nodding to

himself thoughtfully.

Since Yuuto came from Nobunaga's future, Nobunaga had wanted to hear about what happened after his disappearance from Japan.

"Yes. In the span of only ten days, Hideyoshi left Takamatsu Castle and ran a forced march all the way back to Kyoto. He attacked Akechi's army before they could properly prepare for him and ended up routing their forces."

"In only ten days?!" Nobunaga slapped a hand on his thigh in amusement and laughed, a twinkle in his eyes. "Hah hah hah, I'd expect nothing less of the bald rat! He's nothing if not quick at scurrying this way and that."

The distance from Takamatsu Castle to the Japanese capital Kyoto was approximately two hundred kilometers. Getting a huge army to cross that distance in just ten days would have been a nearly impossible challenge.

Nobunaga surely had a much more personal understanding of that difficulty, since he was actually from that time period and familiar with the logistics involved.

"So, by defeating Akechi Mitsuhide, his late master's enemy, Hideyoshi quickly expanded his power and established himself as one of the strongest players within the Oda Clan."

"Did he, now? I imagine Gonroku wasn't too thrilled with that."

"Gonroku?" Yuuto repeated the name, confused.

As they were talking, Nobunaga would keep referring to people by odd or unfamiliar names, and Yuuto was having trouble keeping track of who was who.

"Hm? I'm talking about Shibata Shurinosuke," Nobunaga responded.

Yuuto didn't recognize the name Shurinosuke, but the Shibata family name rang a bell.

"Oh. You mean Shibata Katsuie. It's as you said; he opposed Hideyoshi and, later on, fought and lost to him at the Battle of Shizugatake. And, erm, your younger sister, Oichi, also sadly died alongside him..."

"What? Why would Oichi have anything to do with it?"

“Oh, it’s because by that point, she had been married again, this time to Katsuie...”

“Ohoho, *really*, now? Well, now that I think about it, the two of them had been quite in love with each other, despite the difference in class between them.”

Nobunaga’s gaze drifted toward the ceiling of the hörgr as he recalled the memories, nodding absentmindedly.

This was a historical addendum from the man himself, something that couldn’t be found in any textbook.

It was so much more vivid and real.

“So then, did that bald rat go on to take my Oda Clan for himself?”

“Yes, he did. He took control of the main family line, and then set about suppressing the other factions that resisted him. By around ten years after your death, he had finally achieved the conquest and unification of Japan.”

“Is that so? Well, I suppose that is how it goes,” Nobunaga said with a wry grin, resting his chin on one hand.

Conquering all of the feuding provinces of Japan and uniting them under one rule was a dream that Nobunaga had spent pretty much his entire life pursuing.

Right when he was just a few short steps away from achieving it, he’d been betrayed by one of his allies, and he’d been unable to ensure that his descendants inherited control of his clan. In the end, his loyal subordinate ended up taking both his clan and the glory of achieving his lifelong goal.

Yuuto could easily guess just how disappointing that knowledge must be for him.

“That is all the knowledge I have from history, at least. But after supposedly dying in the incident at Honno-ji, how did you end up in this place?”

Talking about matters that were too somber and depressing for his counterpart would cause problems for Yuuto. He decided to bring them onto a different subject, even if it was a bit forceful of him.

At a glance, Nobunaga simply appeared to Yuuto as if he were a man in his

late thirties or maybe early forties at the most. However, he knew about the incident at Honno-ji.

And if he knew about that, then that would mean...

“Hmph, it’s just as you say. I was ambushed at Honno-ji by that gold-headed fool, and along with Ran here, I was forced into the inner rooms of the temple. I survived Okehazama and Kanegasaki, and plenty of other dangerous moments, but right then, even I thought I must surely be done for. That was when it happened. An old mirror on one of the shelves suddenly shone with a bright light. When I came to, I was in this land.”

“Ah, I had a feeling it was something like that. It’s the same as what happened to me.”

The mirror in question must have been made with álfkipfer, the magical “elven copper” from Yggdrasil, and it must have been connected to some location in this world.

Álfkipfer could normally only be obtained in Yggdrasil, so it was still a mystery how a mirror made with the stuff ended up in the far away country of Japan, though.

“Oho, so you were also brought here by one of those strange mirrors.”

“I was. At first, I couldn’t even speak the language, and suffered quite a bit of hardship living here.”

“Keh heh heh. It was the same for me. Having to learn a foreign language at my age was quite the struggle!”

In contrast to Yuuto’s glum recounting of the experience, Nobunaga laughed it off as just one more event from the past.

Yuuto saw that as just one more way in which he was impressive.

“By the way, how old are you now?”

“I made it to sixty just this year.”

“Then I’ll wish you congratulations on that magnificent milestone.”

Yuuto remembered from his studies that Oda Nobunaga was forty-nine when

he perished at Honno-ji. Nobunaga was famously fond of the Noh play *Atsumori*, and was said to have often quoted the line, “*Human life lasts only fifty years.*”

Nobunaga had died at almost exactly fifty years of age, just like in his favorite verse, and reading that had left a deep impression on Yuuto.

If he were to calculate based on that age...

“That’s impressive, just as I would have expected. Transported into this foreign land where you did not even know the language, in just over ten years you rose to power as the ruler of the Flame Clan, one of its most powerful nations.”

“You would do best not to misunderstand. I did not rise to leadership of a great nation. I *took* the Flame Clan and *transformed it into* a great nation.”

Nobunaga’s tone was very serious and matter-of-fact.

This incredible self-confidence of his, bordering on arrogance, was perhaps only fitting for a legendary hero out of history.

“So, how about you?” Nobunaga asked. “How old are you, then?”

“Erm, I just turned seventeen a little while back. Oh, but going by the way they counted age in your time, I would be considered eighteen.”

“So young! Oh, but more importantly, how many years has it been since you arrived here?”

“Just about an even three years.”

“Oho, just three years!” Sitting cross-legged across from Yuuto, Nobunaga slapped a hand on his thigh again. “Well, how about that. You are much more impressive than I am!”

“Not at all. I was just... I guess I should say blessed with good luck.”

“Don’t be overly humble. You cannot work your way up to a position of power and rule through luck alone. This world is not so kind as that.”

“It was in large part thanks to you, Lord Nobunaga. I studied your policies and methods, and learned a lot from their example.”

“Hmph, such obvious flattery. But it doesn’t hurt me to hear it. Still, you certainly make a habit of just tossing out a person’s true name in normal conversation, don’t you?”

“Huh? ...Oh, in the time period I came from, that’s become normal for everybody. I hope I didn’t offend you.”

By “true name,” Nobunaga was referring to the Japanese concept of *imina*, where calling people by their real names was taboo in certain situations. In this case in particular, he was likely referring to his own given name, Nobunaga.

During the Sengoku period, calling someone by their true first name was only permissible among close, immediate family members, and would be considered offensive from anyone else. Yuuto recalled all that thanks to Nobunaga’s comment, though it was already a bit late.

“It did not offend me in particular, but it did make me curious.”

“Um, so, then, how should I address you?”

“Hm. I think that will depend on how our discussion proceeds from this point forward.” Nobunaga’s lips curled into a grin.

The only ones allowed to call a man from his era by their true first name were immediate family.

In other words, what Yuuto called him going forward would depend on whether he agreed to swear the Oath of the Sibling Chalice or not.

“So, Sibling Chalice with an even split of power between us, was it?” Nobunaga asked. “But, from what I’ve seen of you thus far, I wonder if you are really worth that much?”

As Nobunaga said this, the intimidating aura that surrounded him seemed to expand outward with an almost explosive force.

Yuuto felt attacked, like an invisible hand had clenched his heart in its grip, and a massive weight was pushing down on him.

“Ngh?! ”

“Kh...?! ”

“Eek!”

“Ah!”

From behind him, Yuuto could hear the shrill, gasping cries of the girls who had accompanied him.

Each of them was an Einherjar who had survived numerous battles and brushes with death, and none of them were lacking when it came to strength of nerve. Even in spite of that, they were easily crushed by Nobunaga’s presence.

Indeed, this truly was the aura of the man who had brought the century-long era of warring states in Japan to its conclusion, and nearly taken the whole nation for himself.

And with a smirk, Yuuto brushed that incredible pressure aside.

“As a Japanese man, I look up to you with the utmost respect. But the power balance between our clans is another matter.”

Yuuto was also carrying the fate of the Steel Clan, the weight of tens of thousands of lives, on his shoulders.

As the one who bore that weight, he could not afford to let the pressure of another man’s intimidation bring him to his knees.

Yuuto took a long, deep breath, and mentally switched gears.

“We shake hands across the table, while kicking each other underneath.”

“Reach out to shake hands with your right, while holding a club in your left.”

As those sayings illustrated, diplomatic meetings, especially between the top leaders of respective nations, were never simply a friendly conversation. However peaceful things might seem on the surface, international diplomacy involved competing interests and potential gains and losses on a large scale.

Nobunaga had started applying pressure in order to draw out conditions that were even more favorable to him.

Yuuto couldn’t afford to let him win. He straightened his posture and assumed the face of the reginarch, lord of a powerful nation. He opened up his heart and let the aura of the conqueror within him pour out from it.

“As the patriarch of the Steel Clan, I will once again make this proposal to you, the patriarch of the Flame Clan. I want you to exchange the Oath of the Sibling Chalice with me, with the authority split evenly, fifty-fifty.”

The two of them locked eyes, and the air between them seemed to crackle and spark.

This time, there were sounds of gasps from the Flame Clan soldiers.

“So, you have a good amount of fight in you, too. Good, this would be rather uninteresting otherwise.”

A vicious smile crept across Nobunaga’s face, and the aura around him seemed to grow even more intense, the air even heavier.

The Demon King of the Sengoku period had acknowledged Yuuto and had finally become serious.

The time for exchanging pleasantries had ended. This was the real battle.

Uugh, just what in the world is going on here?

Teary-eyed, Hildegard couldn’t stop herself from whining, even if only in her thoughts.

The two clan patriarchs had just moments ago been cheerfully reminiscing about the shared homeland they came from.

She’d even heard them breaking out in laughter from time to time. Everything seemed like it was going really well, when all of a sudden, it was like air in the whole room changed, and now everyone was being pressed down on by the crushing weight of their menacing auras.

The source of that force was, of course, the two people in the middle of the room glaring at each other with smiles on their faces.

Hildegard’s whole body was shaking, right down to her core, and she couldn’t stop it.

All of the hairs on her body were standing on end, and the heavy air was so oppressive she had difficulty even breathing.

Looking over to the side, the veteran members of the Múspell Unit were frozen stiff, and just as pale as she was, if not even more so.

Felicia and the other high-ranking members of the Steel Clan were seated in front of her, so she couldn't see their faces, but she could see the beads of sweat that had formed on their cheeks and arms.

If it weren't for all that harsh training Mother put me through, I might have wet myself again here...

In that moment, Hildegard was perhaps more grateful to Sigrún than she'd ever been since joining her clan faction.

The pressure that she was feeling right now was so incredibly strong that it made Sigrún's aura of killing intent feel like little more than a strong breeze by comparison, but the training she'd received under her sworn mother had still at least given her some level of resilience against it.

Thanks to that, so far, she'd gotten off with only wetting herself a tiny bit, for just a split second.

In Hildegard's defense, she was hardly a girl lacking in courage or nerves.

As evidenced by how she had pushed aside Sigrún's threatening aura during their sparring match, she was indeed quite suited for this sort of situation.

However, it just so happened that the two people in front of her now were simply on another order of magnitude in terms of power.

Uungh, I should never have come along on this mission!



It felt like minutes were being shaved off of her lifespan, at a faster and faster rate.

This was too much for her heart to handle.

Honestly, she wanted to get up and run out of there, with no regard for appearances or shame. She couldn't move a muscle though; it felt like she was paralyzed.

This was like torture. She didn't understand it.

Don't have a battle between gods down here on the ground!

As Hildegard continued to complain internally, all she could do for now was continue to sit and watch the events in front of her unfold.

Oho! So young, and yet he can wield that much spirit!

Inwardly, Nobunaga was genuinely impressed that this young man had managed to push Nobunaga's intimidating pressure back with his own.

He was a man who was fond of those with strength.

If those under him couldn't produce results, he tossed them aside unceremoniously, as he did with Hayashi Hidesada and Sakuma Nobumori, important retainers to the Oda clan who had been serving since the days of his father. Conversely, as long as someone could display their strength and usefulness to him, he would take in those from undistinguished backgrounds, as he had with Hashiba Hideyoshi. He would even forgive betrayal, as he had with Matsunaga Hisahide.

This young man sitting in front of him had taken control of the tiny, weak Wolf Clan and grown it into a nation that controlled the majority of the Álfheimr region in just a scant two years.

The state of civilization in Yggdrasil was far behind the time he hailed from. It was easy to imagine that, like himself, this young man must have used an assortment of knowledge from the future that was novel to the people here in order to help his rise to power.

But even so, that didn't change how incredible an accomplishment it was.

Nobunaga had decided he liked Yuuto. However, he was also the twisted type of man who enjoyed bullying the people he liked the most.

“Now then, how shall we approach this? I suspect I know why you want this alliance with me. It is because of the subjugation order issued by that so-called þjóðann, yes?”

“So, you already knew about that...” Yuuto said, with a bitter expression.

Nobunaga responded with an impish smile. “I would, seeing as I also received a message calling for my participation in the campaign against you.”

Nobunaga had no knowledge of the workings of gods or spirits, and he certainly wasn’t born and raised in the religious culture of Yggdrasil. He was also the sort of man who, despite not believing in the teachings of Buddhism, publicly referred to himself as the Demon King of the Sixth Heaven, stealing a title from the Buddhist pantheon.

Nobunaga had not an ounce of reverence or fear for the authority or symbolic power of the Divine Empress, nor any intention of ever obeying her imperial authority.

In fact, he was the sort of person who, if you told him, “Do this!” he’d be tempted to refuse even if it was something he’d originally been planning to do.

And so, he’d completely dismissed the subjugation order and forgotten about it until this point. But for the purposes of testing this young man’s character, it was the perfect weapon.

“I can see that, to you and the Steel Clan, my Chalice would become a key to rescuing you from this situation in which you are surrounded by enemies from all sides, and thus saving you from your doom. However, why is it that I fail to see anything especially appetizing about that arrangement for us in the Flame Clan? And I’d advise you not to respond by telling me that I won’t be threatened by a great power from the north, or something *boring* like that. After all, even without sharing an alliance with you, I know your situation *very* well, and I know you are in no position to mount any real threat against us—or prepare a defense against us.”

In one fell swoop, Nobunaga had laid out the Steel Clan’s situation and its

goals for the alliance, and then shot down in advance the argument Yuuto might make.

If Yuuto could not reply effectively here, then that was fine; Nobunaga could claim this alliance was his clan doing a favor for theirs, and use that to gain more advantages and benefits from the arrangement. And if Yuuto managed to exceed his expectations with some clever response, then that would be entertaining.

No matter how this situation turned out, Nobunaga could enjoy the results.

Nobunaga examined Yuuto's face, looking for his reaction. The young man didn't seem particularly fazed.

"If you understand our situation that well, then there's no point in glossing things over. In that case... How about this? During our invasion of the Lightning Clan so far, we have captured and taken control of the Gashina region. If you agree to swear the Oath of the Chalice with me, we shall hand over that entire territory to the Flame Clan."

"What?!" Even Nobunaga could not help but be taken aback.

The ruler of a nation had a primary responsibility to protect the territory he or she controlled.

And what's more, Gashina wasn't just any old stretch of land.

It was next to the Körmt River, and the river basin soil was rich and perfect for farming. Nobunaga's mind raced thinking of just how many soldiers could be fed by the wheat grown there.

That territory had extremely high strategic importance. Agreeing so easily to give that up was something only an utter fool would do.

Their negotiations had only just begun, so they should still be in the opening moves of this game. If this young man laid out such a valuable card on the table this early, it might leave him open for demands for even more at the end.

Had Nobunaga mistakenly given him too much credit? Had he misjudged him?

As he stared suspiciously at Yuuto, he soon realized that wasn't true.

There wasn't a trace of hesitation or doubt in Yuuto's eyes. He didn't show

any hint of regret for what he would be giving up, either.

It wasn't at all the face of the sort of weak man who made generous offers in order to win the other party's favor. His was the face of someone who had quietly made his own shrewd calculations, and then resolved to engage himself against the great Oda Nobunaga, with every intent of coming out the winner. It was the face of a *real* man.

What is going on here?

Nobunaga furrowed his brow, unable to figure out the true purpose of Yuuto's move.

Was there perhaps some problem with Gashina? He hadn't received any information to that effect, though. According to his prior research, the area had seen a large, steady increase in productivity over the last several years.

He couldn't guess what this young man was trying to do at all. And that mystery felt marvelous.

Heh heh, you're quite the entertaining opponent!

In contrast to his age, Nobunaga's heart was dancing with childlike excitement.

"What do you think?" Yuuto asked, putting more power into his tone. "I would say that arrangement is more than appetizing enough for the Flame Clan, wouldn't you?"

Just now, he had definitely gotten the sense that his offer had knocked his opponent off balance, and he had to push harder here.

As ruler of his nation, Yuuto had a duty to retain and protect the territory he controlled. He was fully aware of that.

And what's more, this was fertile land along the Körmt River.

If he applied the Norfolk crop rotation system, fertilizer, and other advanced agricultural techniques held by the Steel Clan, then within three years that area would without a doubt be producing more than double the output in its harvests, which would grow the Steel Clan even further.

Of course, that would only be true if he *had* three years to spare.

It wasn't clear if Yggdrasil would even still exist three years from now.

At the very least, Yuuto was planning to have already completed the movement of his people to another continent by then.

In that sense, Gashina was land he was planning to abandon anyway.

Of course, he wasn't about to offer up long-held territory from within the previous borders of the Steel Clan, as it would be too difficult to navigate the issues of national honor and his duty to his people. But lands he'd newly acquired from the Lightning Clan were fair game, and he would be able to justify it to his clan.

Additionally, by giving away territory that was soon going to be worthless to him anyway, he could eliminate the threat of invasion from his south, giving him the footing he needed to prepare to march towards the center of the empire without worrying about an attack from behind.

If it meant this negotiation succeeded, then he could ask for no better deal. Part of him did feel like he was cheating Nobunaga somewhat, given the land would soon be lost to the seas, but in this situation, he couldn't let that niggling frustration stop him.

"Hm. True, that offer would make this alliance work to our benefit as well. However, I am also quite familiar with the fact that any offer that seems too good to be true has a hidden side to it," Nobunaga said, and glared at Yuuto with eyes that seemed to be searching him for clues.

It was a perfectly natural reaction.

As a matter of fact, as stated above, there indeed was a hidden catch to Yuuto's offer. Of course, he couldn't exactly explain that.

Without showing any change in his expression, Yuuto continued, reciting the speech he'd memorized.

"Our success during this campaign would not have been possible if not for the Flame Clan. Your war with the Lightning Clan pulled their armies south, and you killed their former patriarch Steinþórr. You could say we reaped the benefits of

your struggle with them. As I have every intention of becoming your sworn brother, greedily keeping those benefits for our clan now would only lead to a lingering sense of unfairness between us in the future. I simply concluded that if I wanted to forge a more solid, lasting fellowship with your clan, it would be better for me to be more generous with those spoils.”

“Is that so? You want to forge a solid, lasting fellowship with us, do you? Well, I have no reason to doubt those words. And getting my hands on a large amount of fertile land without having to fight for it is not a bad proposition, either.”

“Th-Then, does that mean...?”

Yuuto unconsciously leaned forward, thinking that he might have finally struck home.

But Nobunaga held up a hand, cutting him off.

“It’s not a bad proposition... but it is only through living in constant, desperate struggle that one’s life shines with the greatest light. And the man known as Nobunaga is not someone who would content himself with idly accepting that which is simply handed to him by others.”

“Wha...?!”

“If I can obtain something so valuable without any effort at all, then I will *spare no effort* and obtain even more with the strength of my ambition! That is who I am!”

The hand Nobunaga had held up to silence Yuuto was now clenched tightly into a fist.

Yuuto could see that the man’s arm was criss-crossed with numerous sword scars.

It was visual evidence that backed up his words. This was a man who lived his life taking what he wanted by force.

“The invitation to attack you arrived at my door, as it surely did for every other clan. You will be forced to occupy yourself in dealing with all of them, and for quite some time at that. I would need only to take advantage of that

situation, and I might be able to snap up *all* of the lands adjacent to the Körmt River without much trouble, yes? If I were to settle only for Gashina and let the rest go, that would be a waste of such a great opportunity for my clan, don't you think? Hm?"

Using his complete understanding of Yuuto's situation to his advantage, he was now aiming to snatch away everything he could and obtain the maximum possible benefit for his own nation.

It was just what one would expect from the man who spent his life trying to conquer all of Japan. This wasn't going to be easy at all.

"In that case, in addition to Gashina, I will give you Cozzene. So..."

"Not enough!" Nobunaga shouted, rejecting Yuuto's offer before he could even finish speaking.

"It's not enough? Cozzene is a very abundant region, you know."

"Oh, it's not nearly enough! I don't want pieces, I want *everything*."

"...This is going nowhere." Yuuto sighed and shook his head.

In other words, Nobunaga was demanding all of Yuuto's territory—demanding that Yuuto and his nation submit and become a subsidiary to the Flame Clan.

In negotiation, it was normal to hold off from laying all of one's cards on the table at the outset. That was something the other party would naturally understand too, like an unspoken agreement between both sides.

And so, when Yuuto offered up Gashina as his first move, it was within the scope of his calculations that Nobunaga might then demand more. At worst, Yuuto was even prepared to give up all of the territory he captured from the Lightning Clan during this campaign.

This demand, however, was one he just couldn't accept.

"Then would you rather make us your enemy? I would have no issue with that." Nobunaga flashed a cruel smile as he piled on even more pressure.

This guy keeps forcing me into a corner every chance he gets, Yuuto couldn't help but think to himself.

It was as if everything was transparent to this man—not just Yuuto’s current dilemma, but the outcome he was most trying to avoid. He was going to be stuck in this disadvantage if he couldn’t do something about that.

He decided he had no other choice, and reached for the object strapped at his waist.

“I wonder about that,” he said, pulling it out of its holster. “I think you might want to avoid making the Steel Clan *your* enemy.”

With a fearless smile, Yuuto gripped the object with both hands, abruptly turned his body ninety degrees to the side, and pulled back lightly with his index finger.

There was a loud *BANG!* But not only one. There was a second, a third, a fourth, as Yuuto pulled the trigger in quick succession.

The explosive sound of the shots resounded throughout the hörgr, and in the direction he’d fired, there were four new holes as wide as a person’s little finger, going all the way through the wall.

“What?! A tanegashima?! You have them, too?! And it can fire *repeatedly?!?*”

Even Nobunaga was openly shocked by this.

In the era Nobunaga came from, the matchlock gun was the most advanced firearm available, and that weapon’s most fatal weakness was its inability to be fired in succession.

More than anyone else, Nobunaga would have spent a great many hours struggling with the dilemma posed by that weakness, and so he would certainly understand just how frightening a weapon that overcame that weakness would be.

“That’s right, and I can still keep firing. I did tell you, remember? I came from the world four hundred years into your future.”

With that, Yuuto made a show of blowing the smoke from the barrel of his gun, and returned it to the holster at his waist.

His hands and shoulder were throbbing painfully from the recoil, but this was a critical moment, and so he made sure not to let on in the slightest.

“Just as your clan has your tanegashimas, we have these. If you plan on making a move against us, we won’t let you off easy. I trust you understand?”

Yuuto said this with dramatic confidence, but in actuality, it was totally a bluff.

It was true that Yuuto’s pistol was incredibly advanced by the standards of weapons in this world. However, he’d only brought the one back with him from the modern era.

And what’s more, the modern bullets were also limited, and he couldn’t manufacture more of them.

He was speaking as if he actually had a large supply of them, in order to threaten the Flame Clan patriarch and make him back off. This was his trump card.

After all, Yuuto knew a lot about this man.

He knew that Nobunaga was bold and fearless, and moved as quick as lightning once he’d decided to take action... but that he was also cautious and prudent, willing to take his time and lay the foundations for his success before making his move.

Nobunaga was a man who engineered the conditions for his victories before he set out to fight, and who would not start a battle he couldn’t win.

That was what Yuuto was betting on with this provocation.

“Oho...” Nobunaga’s expression had changed.

Until a moment ago, it looked as if he were testing Yuuto, but also teasing him. Like this was all just a game to him. Now, that layer had been peeled away.

The Demon King of the Sengoku era looked at Yuuto seriously now, and Yuuto felt himself gulp as the man’s true aura seemed to radiate off of him.

The man’s intimidating presence was absolutely overpowering, and Yuuto was facing him down not with real power, but an empty threat. It demanded an incredible amount of nerve.

Yuuto was acting strong and confident on the outside, but his heart was pounding, and even by just meeting Nobunaga’s glare, he could feel his mental

strength being worn down.

Silence stretched for a few seemingly-endless moments, and each second passing felt like an hour.

“Hm, it does seem like taking you all on would cause us a bit more pain than it’s worth.”

Nobunaga nodded once, assenting to Yuuto’s argument.

At last, Yuuto was negotiating from equal footing.

He knew it was still thin ice that could crack under him at any moment, though.

“In the first place, I honestly haven’t the time to waste out here fighting over these western lands anyway,” Nobunaga continued, suddenly talking in a very candid manner. “Even more so if my enemy stands to give me real trouble. I’m already this old, after all. I still have the dream I couldn’t accomplish back in Nippon—conquering the land and uniting it under my rule. If I wish to make that dream come true here, then once I’ve finished bringing the Lightning Clan under my heel, I would honestly prefer to eliminate any threat of attack from behind, so that I can hurry and march on the imperial capital Glaðsheimr.”

As Yuuto suspected, this man wasn’t going to be satisfied with ruling over just the Flame Clan and the Lightning Clan. It seemed that in this land, just as in the one he came from, he was striving for total conquest.

And he was going to move toward that goal head-on, as quickly as possible, without hiding his intentions. That was also very like him.

“At the risk of repeating myself, my clan is also quite busy with our own situation, and we would also like to eliminate any threat of attack from behind while we deal with it.”

“Yes, it would seem both you and I each have our own share of foes we need to focus on at the moment. I’d say that means it’s a bit too soon for us to be fighting with each other.”

All of Nobunaga’s troublesome taunting and pressure were gone, as if they’d never even existed.

If that's how you feel, then you should have started with that! is what Yuuto thought to himself, but he also knew that Nobunaga had likely changed his tune after testing him and finding him worthy.

If Nobunaga had found Yuuto to be beneath his consideration, then he surely would have been content merely to wage war, conquer Yuuto's clan, and add them to his own strength.

Perhaps this new attitude was an indication that the Oath of the Sibling Chalice was back up for discussion. But just as Yuuto was thinking that, Nobunaga's next words sent those hopes plummeting again.

"Even so, this is a problem. I aim to be the undisputed conqueror of this realm, and so I have no desire to swear an equal oath with anyone. After all, there are not two suns in the sky."

Nobunaga rested his chin on one arm, deep in thought.

It was the dream he'd spent his whole life trying to achieve, then dedicated himself to all over again after getting sent to this new world. That dedication wasn't going to be something he could so easily compromise on.

But Yuuto wasn't about to back down either.

"Won't you reconsider that?" he asked.

"It's not as simple as you make it sound," Nobunaga replied.

Then, suddenly, he slapped a hand on his thigh, as if he'd just thought of a brilliant idea.

"...Oh, that's it! How about this, boy? What do you think of becoming my child?"

Yuuto had only just moments earlier rejected the idea of becoming subservient to Nobunaga. It seemed impossible for this man, but for a moment Yuuto wondered if he might have simply forgotten, a lapse of memory in his old age.

Curious, Yuuto gave Nobunaga a questioning look, encouraging him to continue.

"Of course, I would not ask it of you unconditionally. If you accept my Chalice

and become my sworn child, I would grant you the position of second-in-command, and the hand of my daughter Homura in marriage. As I said before, I'm already an old man. I've only got so much time left. Not only that, I have not fathered any other children in this land."

"Wait, but that means..."

Yuuto was pretty sure he knew what that meant.

His mind still told him it couldn't be true, that it was impossible.

But Nobunaga nodded decisively, and confirmed it.

"Marry my daughter, and inherit my family name."

"How about it? I would be absorbing the Steel Clan into the Flame Clan initially, but eventually the entire Flame Clan would be yours. It's not a bad deal, is it?"

Nobunaga stuck out his hand in a manner that practically demanded a handshake to seal the deal.

It was true that it wasn't a bad deal at all.

In fact, Yuuto actually found it rather tempting.

Nobunaga—*the* Oda Nobunaga—was acknowledging him as worthy of becoming his son, and the successor of his family and clan.

There was no way that wouldn't make him happy.

And still, Yuuto had no choice but to slowly shake his head.

"I'm sorry. I can't accept that offer."

If Yuuto were asked if he wanted to take Nobunaga's hand then and there, he'd be lying if he said he didn't.

In fact, if he were the Yuuto of just one year ago, he absolutely would have accepted the Oath of the Chalice under those terms. Well, okay, there was his relationship with Mitsuki to consider, so the whole business about marrying Nobunaga's daughter would have been difficult to work out.

Fundamentally, Yuuto's policies as patriarch in the past had all been geared

towards providing safety and security for his people.

Future generations would look to historical examples of Oda Nobunaga's ruthlessness in burning the temples at Mt. Hiei, or the harsh way he often acted towards his subordinates, and form an image of him in popular culture as a cruel, heartless person. However, Nobunaga was also generally a benevolent ruler over the territory he governed.

His famous "free markets and open guilds" policy greatly stimulated economic growth and reduced the prices of goods in his lands.

He instituted sweeping peasant tax reforms, doing away with the complex preexisting manorialist and feudalist public tax systems, and replacing them with a principal tax on the amount of rice grown on a farmer's land.

It was said that Nobunaga's territorial strongholds of Owari and Mino were so orderly and safe in most places that women could travel the roads alone.

Here in Yggdrasil, the fact that the Flame Clan could support tens of thousands of soldiers in its armies was also proof of how prosperous it was. He surely must have enacted a number of useful reforms and improvements here too.

There was no doubt that he would be a beneficial ruler for the peoples of the Steel Clan, one who guaranteed them a more prosperous future.

But Yuuto knew the truth about Yggdrasil's fate now. Entrusting the Steel Clan to Nobunaga was not an option.

"Why not?" Nobunaga asked. "Is it because you cannot trust what amounts to no more than a spoken promise, one I might discard once I've acquired the Steel Clan for myself? Do you think Oda Nobunaga is a man who would go back on his word? I can only ask you to believe me when I say that I absolutely meant what I'm offering."

"No," Yuuto said, "I believe you. I know that, while you earned your reputation as the "Demon King," you also honored your oaths and commitments to a degree that was incredible by the standards of the chaotic age you lived in."

"Hm."

“However, there is something I *have* to do, at any cost.” Yuuto looked Nobunaga square in the eyes. “And in order to accomplish it, I can’t agree to swear the Oath of the Chalice to someone if it places me beneath them.”

He was going to be tearing the people away from this land they’d always known, forcing them all to move across the sea to settle a new land. And he’d be undertaking this on an impossibly large scale.

It hardly took any thought to conclude that in order to pull that off, Yuuto was going to need absolute, unquestioned power and authority. This wasn’t something he could force on people if he was someone else’s subordinate.

Even if, after Nobunaga’s death, Yuuto ascended to the rank of patriarch once more, things would still be different. Since he would have willingly submitted himself under another person’s rule, he would no longer possess the same fervent support from his subjects, support that right now was akin to religious faith.

He didn’t know if Yggdrasil would even last that long in the first place.

He couldn’t afford to take his time.

Nobunaga stared at Yuuto carefully for a moment, then snorted. “Hmph. You’ve got a strong light in your eyes, boy. They’re burning with principle and conviction. It would be boorish to try and force a compromise from someone with those eyes, I suppose.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Let me ask you, then: Just what is it that would drive you to reject my offer? Just what are you so intent on achieving? Conquest of the realm? Do you mean to say that, as a man, you also wish to grab power with your own hands rather than inherit it from another?!”

As Nobunaga pelted Yuuto with these questions, the power of his warrior’s spirit roiled the air around them.

That presence, along with his words, drove home to Yuuto that he really was a natural-born ruler, every bit the hero that the legends had painted him as.

Yuuto slowly shook his head. “No, while I do want to conquer the capital and

take control of the realm, it's not because of my pride as a man or anything like that."

"Oho?"

"I... have something I want to discuss with you, but only with you alone. Would that be all right?"

"Hm..." After thinking for a moment, Nobunaga nodded, and turned to face his second-in-command. "Ran." Nobunaga gestured at him with his chin.

"Yes, my lord!" Ran responded, standing up immediately. Just as you would come to expect from a loyal retainer who had been serving his master since Honno-ji, Ran needed no more explanation. He quickly gathered the other Flame Clan soldiers and took them with him out of the ritual hall.

"Felicia." Likewise, Yuuto called his adjutant's name, and she nodded in response.

"I understand."

Felicia stood up and took the Steel Clan retinue with her and left the hörgr, just as the Flame Clan soldiers had done.

Once Nobunaga could confirm that everyone was gone, he turned to Yuuto again.

"So, then, what is it you wish to talk about that would require going through all the trouble of sending the others away?" he asked, his tone deeply curious.

"It's the truth about Yggdrasil."

"Hm, the 'truth,' you say?"

"This land is going to sink into the ocean sometime in the very near future. The Steel Clan, the Flame Clan, the empire, all of it will be gone."

Yuuto had chosen to deliberately reveal to Nobunaga what he had spoken of to no one else except Linnea.

Nobunaga was also the ruler of a huge nation, and he carried the responsibility of a great many lives on his shoulders, even more than Yuuto.

Yuuto figured he also had a right and a duty to know about this danger.

“Really, now? Not the funniest joke, but you certainly like to think on a grand scale.”

Nobunaga’s reaction was just what Yuuto had expected.

“Yes, I suppose that is the normal response,” he said, slumping his shoulders.

Indeed, if someone had said the exact same thing to Yuuto, he would have dismissed it as a delusion born of someone’s paranoia or apocalyptic fantasies.

And so, Yuuto started over, and explained everything from the beginning, piece by piece.

The fact that this world was Earth over three thousand years in the past compared to the era Nobunaga had lived in.

The fact that, despite that, in Yuuto’s time, no landmass with the same features as Yggdrasil existed anymore.

The many connections and similarities between Yggdrasil and the land called Atlantis found in ancient Greek texts.

The record of Atlantis having sunken into the ocean.

That while he couldn’t be sure of the exact date that Yggdrasil would sink, his research suggested that it was fairly imminent.

The conclusion that Yuuto had reached, which was that he should seize the authority of the imperial ruler, and use that authority to convince as many Yggdrasilian denizens as possible to migrate to a new land.

Yuuto explained all of this to Nobunaga earnestly.

All together, it took almost an hour to tell him the whole story, but he listened intently the whole time, without interrupting or laughing off the things Yuuto was saying.

“There are at least a few points in your story that make some sense. In particular, the part about this being three thousand years before my time.”

Nobunaga seemed somewhat receptive and understanding of the concepts Yuuto was explaining.

That was impressive, and also par for the course for him.

There was an anecdote about the time when Portuguese missionaries first showed him a globe and explained that the Earth was round. Supposedly, while Nobunaga's retainers all dismissed the explanation as incomprehensible, Nobunaga alone said, *"That makes logical sense."*

Now here he was, pushing past sixty, and still with a mind flexible enough to wrap itself around the strange forces at work here.

"However," he went on, "I can't simply accept everything you say on its face. There isn't nearly enough evidence to back it up. And you don't even have any idea when this will happen, right? Why, even Mt. Fuji might erupt any day without warning, but that hasn't stopped the great number of people who choose to live right next to it. It would not be sane to ask me to abandon my nation and my ambitions for something so uncertain."

Nobunaga's mind might be flexible, but on the other hand, he was also a thorough realist who preferred logic backed up by ample evidence. That was what made him so fearsome.

He was flexible enough to accept any truth, as long as it coincided with sound logic.

Unfortunately, just as he himself had said, Yuuto's claims weren't backed up by nearly enough supporting evidence. And this was thirty-five hundred years before Yuuto's era, so he couldn't exactly get his hands on any solid evidence, either. Even if by some chance he *did* find something, some ancient record, he had no way of proving it was authentic.

Nobunaga could just claim that Yuuto had forged it, and he'd have no way of disproving that.

At this point, Yuuto didn't have enough evidence to convince a realist like Nobunaga to alter his course.

"Even so, I am fully convinced it is the truth. And I am determined to relocate my people to a new land."

"Is that so? So it goes, then. Well, they are your clan. You should do with them what you wish." With a wry smile, Nobunaga waved one hand at Yuuto, as if shooing away a dog.

This was something Yuuto knew might happen.

The watershed moment had passed, and the two of them were now traveling along separate paths.

Nobunaga stood up, and looked down at Yuuto.

"I will tell you this one last thing. I really did mean it when I said that I have no interest in taking the Steel Clan's lands. You have my word."

Yuuto nodded. "Thank you."

Nobunaga was the kind of person who did not break the promises he made.

His repeating his statement just now was likely his own small gift of encouragement to a young man about to traverse the difficult road lying ahead of him.

Yuuto was grateful to receive it.

"However!"

Nobunaga's eyes suddenly gleamed fiercely.

He flashed a savage grin, and a violent, overpowering aura rose up from him.

Yuuto felt chills running down his spine, and he gulped nervously.

This pressure was far beyond anything he'd felt so far. Nobunaga was technically shorter in height than Yuuto, or should be, but right now he seemed like a giant more than twice Yuuto's height.

This was likely the *true* aura of the conqueror of the Sengoku period, the man who struck fear into his enemies as the Demon King.

"Engrave these words on your heart. If anyone stands in the way of my conquest of the realm... I will show them no mercy."

The Flame Clan second-in-command, Ran, waited for his liege inside a small detached building near the hörgr, which was serving as their sleeping quarters for the night. After some time, the patriarch entered.

"...Welcome back, my lord."

“Mm.”

Ran’s greeting was just a bit slower than usual, because for a second he had been overpowered by the intense spirit billowing out from his master’s body.

The fact that it was only a second’s delay was likely because he had spent almost half of his life serving at his master’s side, and so was somewhat used to it.

Put another way, even Ran had been overpowered by Nobunaga’s aura. That was how unusually strong it was today.

“It would seem that my lord thinks quite fondly of the Steel Clan patriarch,” Ran remarked.

There was no one better than him when it came to perceiving what his patriarch was thinking and feeling.

It had now been ten whole years since the two of them were transported to Yggdrasil, and not once had he seen his master looking in such high spirits as he was now. He must have been satisfied to meet a worthy opponent for the first time in so long.

“Oh, yes! He faced me down without flinching back even a step. Quite the impressive young lad. Thanks to him, I had an enjoyable time. He is still a bit lacking in maturity, though.”

“Lacking, my lord? I would have said that he is quite seasoned for someone so young.”

Ran had been deeply impressed by Yuuto’s thoughtful judgment, rare in someone who was not even twenty. It was just the level of maturity one might expect from the young man who had transformed the tiny Wolf Clan into a large, powerful nation.

Ran had even found himself feeling envious of Yuuto, who was younger than him.

But according to his master’s assessment, even the Steel Clan patriarch was immature.

“In what way would you say he is lacking, for example?”

“There’s that tanegashima that could fire multiple shots in a row, for one. I would wager you nine-to-one odds that it was nothing more than a bluff.”

“Eh?!” Ran’s eyebrows shot up and he went wide-eyed with surprise.

It put heavy wrinkles on his forehead, creasing his pretty face.

“But, my lord, we saw it fire, did we not? Are you saying he used some sort of trick to merely make it appear so?”

“No, the weapon itself was real. However, I would say that’s the only one he has. At most, he might have up to two or three more. And only a couple of those guns wouldn’t make enough of a difference on the battlefield to truly threaten us.”

The Flame Clan had an army of over fifty thousand strong.

However powerful that tanegashima from the future might be, it was true that it wouldn’t be a real threat against such numbers.

“How were you able to discover the lie?”

“Because of what he said himself. He’s been here for just about three whole years. Think, even with a sample tanegashima to use as a design model, just how many years did it take us to get to the point where we could make this many?”

“Ah...” Ran realized his embarrassing mistake and winced. He’d been so distracted by the existence of a rapid-fire tanegashima that he’d overlooked that crucial information.

“Heh heh, the people in this land could not even make their own iron at first. Constructing such an advanced weapon from the bottom up in less than three years would simply be impossible, yes? In other words, he must have brought it with him from the future.”

“Now that you say that, it does make sense... However, if you realized he was bluffing, why did you not call him out on his lie?”

“Because I was not completely *certain* it was a lie.”

“Ah, I see...”

After almost fifteen years serving at his master's side, Ran had a good understanding of the man's personality.

When Nobunaga said "nine-to-one odds" in respect to the bluff, he was also acknowledging there was a one in ten chance Yuuto had been telling the truth.

Ran's master had only one goal, and that was conquest and rule over this empire.

He had no interest in directly conquering the lands of the Steel Clan, which were far to the west of the imperial capital.

If he were to pour his military resources into a war with the Steel Clan and, against all odds, suffer a defeat or heavy casualties, that would cause a great deal of issues for his preparations towards his invasion of the imperial capital, which was planned to begin soon.

He wanted to avoid such unnecessary risk.

"That reminds me, why did you decide not to exchange the Oath of the Chalice with him? When you said that you had no intention of exchanging an evenly split Chalice, that was the first I had heard of it. Did you have a change of heart?"

Up until the meeting, Nobunaga had been saying that if the Steel Clan patriarch lived up to the stories about him, he would be more than willing to exchange the Oath of the Sibling Chalice with him.

And, by the look of things during the meeting, his master had been satisfied that the Steel Clan patriarch was indeed worthy.

So satisfied, in fact, that he had been willing to offer the young man Ran's position as second-in-command and the rights to succeed him as the next patriarch.

"I realized that if I swore an evenly split oath with him, it would cause a good deal of trouble for me later."

"Trouble, my lord? Why would that be? In this land, the Oath of the Chalice is absolutely binding. If you wanted to eliminate the risk of attack from him, would that not be the greatest assurance you could ask for?" Ran tilted his head

quizzically.

Nobunaga laughed softly. It was a laugh that conveyed amusement, but it also seemed to hint at a newfound conviction.

“It would be trouble *because* the bond is absolute. Heh. He was more impressive than I had imagined, and I had a premonition during our negotiations. A feeling that, one day soon, he and I are going to meet again, in order to decide once and for all who will take control of this land.”

EPILOGUE

“Geez, what the hell was *with* that guy’s aura?! He was an absolute monster!”

Yuuto was splayed across the low bed, shouting complaints into the air.

He was completely exhausted, unable to even move his body anymore.

“You did wonderfully, Big Brother,” Felicia said, using a handheld fan to blow some cool air onto his face.

Felicia herself had also apparently been physically affected by Nobunaga’s aura; her face looked pale and sickly.

She happened to be on the better end of things, though. The Múspell soldiers, and even the Einherjar Hildegard, were all sitting or lying on the ground, and they looked to be completely spent in both body and mind.

Even Albertina lacked her usual happy-go-lucky smile; she clung fast to Kristina and didn’t let go.

Kristina was doing a good job of acting just fine on the surface, but she had a somewhat floaty, distracted look in her eyes.

“So, that was Oda Nobunaga, the great hero whom you modeled so many of your strategies after? Big Brother, I must say that he was a figure far beyond anything I had conceived. Steinþórr seems like a cute kitten by comparison.”

“You’re really not wrong...”

Of course, if it were a case of one-on-one combat, Steinþórr would absolutely be the victor.

But that wasn’t what they were talking about.

It was Nobunaga’s overpowering presence, the immense strength of his charisma. It was so powerful that just by being in the same room with him, one felt the sensation of being crushed underneath it.

“I am truly impressed that you were able to face someone like that, Big

Brother. If it were myself, I believe I would have been too swept up in his presence to be able to speak at all.”

“Yeah, well, I still get the impression that he was just toying with me that whole time.”

The sudden, intense spirit that Nobunaga had thrown out at the very end of their meeting had been on a completely different level.

It didn’t seem like the Flame Clan patriarch had been going easy on Yuuto during the opening section of their negotiations, but it did seem to mean that, in the end, all of it had just been nothing more than something he’d gone along with for the sake of his own amusement.

“That, that can’t be true...!” Felicia gasped.

Felicia had a tendency to overestimate Yuuto, so she apparently found it hard to believe that someone could actually get the best of Yuuto while only taking him half-seriously.

But the reason she’d gasped was because, deep down, she couldn’t erase the feeling that perhaps that man really *was* that powerful.

“Well... that doesn’t mean I’m going to let him beat me, either.”

Yuuto lifted his legs up into the air and then brought them down, using the momentum to jump to his feet.

The will to fight had been ignited in his heart, and that quickly pumped energy back into his tired body.

“Things didn’t go like I originally planned, but despite everything that happened, I got a promise from him that he wouldn’t attack us or our territory. Thanks to that, I can focus everything on taking care of the other clans and their encirclement strategy. I’m gonna have to deal with them fast, though—before that monster of an old man makes his next move.”

Ironically enough, on the very same day as the meeting between the Flame and Steel Clan patriarchs, the wheels of fate had begun to turn in another place entirely.

The five allied clans—the Sword, Cloud, Fang, Panther, and Hoof Clans—all

publicly declared war against the Steel Clan simultaneously.

The invasion of the Steel Clan had begun.

To be continued...

Afterword

Hello, and good to see you again. This is Seiichi Takayama.

As I'm writing these words, I'm suffering from a terrible sore throat. It managed to confuse my editor, who heard my voice and thought I was a different person.

Apparently the hoarse throat version of my voice sounds a bit like the illustrator Yukisan.

That's an unexpected discovery!

Anyway, I present to you, the readers, the completed Volume 11 of *The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar*. I hope you all enjoyed it.

This volume marks my twentieth published book.

Twenty books, everyone! Twenty!

Getting this far was only possible thanks to all of you readers who were willing to pick up and buy these books.

Thank you very, very much!

The breakdown is: Seven volumes of *Ore to Kanojo no Zettai Ryouiki* (*Me, and that Girl's Pandora Box*), two volumes of *Maou Goroshi no Ryuu Kishi* (*The Dragon Knight Who Slayed the Demon Lord*), and eleven volumes of *The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar*. In terms of how much I've written, if I estimate one hundred thousand written characters per volume, that's two million characters!

I've written quite a lot, if I do say so myself.

I want to keep on striving towards a goal of thirty books, and then forty books after that.

I don't have anything interesting and new to write about in this afterword, so instead, I'll let you in on some behind-the-scenes details about the making of this series.

Well, I know there are some people who jump right to the back of the book and read the afterword first (and I'm one of them), so this'll only cover the story up to Volume 10.

If you've bought this book as part of a series set and you're just going through reading all of the afterwords first, yes, you, please turn back now.

Now then, regarding the true identity of Yggdrasil, as explained in Volume 9: The truth is that I originally planned to reveal this in Volume 1, and the name was even right there at the end of my primary manuscript for that volume. (The primary is a first draft, before the editors have even touched anything. For me it's pretty much like a springboard for ideas.) Revealing that world's mystery so easily and so early on would have just been boring, so I'm glad I ended up cutting that out. (haha) Going back even further, in the early planning stages for the story and setting, I'd planned to have this take place in an entirely different, alternate world.

In order to really get the most out of the type of story I wanted to write, I thought up two basic world types: "A world set in a Bronze Age civilization of around 1500 B.C." or "A world of beast people without any civilization or technology."

I ended up thinking up the stuff in Volume 10 that would tie together Yggdrasil and its true identity, and as a result, I went with the first choice, but the beast-people world is also a setting I'd like to try at some point.

Once I'd decided that Yggdrasil wasn't an alternate world, but in fact the world of the past, I began looking around for a civilization that would serve as the motif for the culture of Yggdrasil.

Though, speaking frankly, if we're talking about civilizations in the 16th century B.C. that still have lots of records you can find, we're pretty much only talking about cultures in the Orient. (haha) To tell the truth, I'm actually a big fan of Shinohara Chie-sensei's manga *Red River*, so I figured this must be fate.

Now then, once the background lore for the world started to shape up, last was the method of transport.

In *isekai* stories nowadays, apparently you can just have a truck slam into your protagonist and send him off to the alternate world (haha), but back during

development, I didn't know that.

The first possibility I thought of was to have a certain genius character invent a time-space dislocation device.

Using the built-in communication function of that device, the protagonist could send and receive information to and from the modern era.

However, my editor panned the idea, saying that it would be forcing too strong of a link between this series and my previous one.

Well, I guess that's only natural.

People who hadn't read my previous series would have a hard time understanding the context, so that would just create nothing but extra risk for the new series.

And with that, I've filled up my page quota for this volume, so I'll move on to the special thanks.

To my editor U-sama, I know that my manuscript submission was right up to the very edge of the deadline this time, and I'm very truly sorry about that.

To Yukisan-sensei, thank you for your wonderful, beautiful illustrations.

And to all of the many people involved in the production of this volume, and who helped make it possible, I extend my heartfelt thanks.

And finally, I extend my deepest thanks of all to you, dear readers, for taking this book into your hands.

And with that, I hope to see you again in Volume 12.

Seiichi Takayama

Bonus Glossary — Volume 11

The following is a list of locations, titles, aliases, and terms appearing in *The Master of Ragnarok and Blesser of Einherjar* Volume 11 which are or contain references to Old Norse and Norse Mythology.

In the original Japanese text, they often appear as a descriptive term or phrase in Japanese, with the corresponding Old Norse name in ruby superscript, or *furigana*. For example, Sigrún's title appears as the Japanese phrase "Strongest Silver Wolf," and the *furigana* above notes that this should be read as "Mánagarmr."

A helpful guide to the pronunciation of Norse vowels and consonants can be found through public websites such as wikibooks (https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Old_Norse/Grammar/Alphabet_and_Pronunciation). In cases where the term has a commonly used alternative spelling without Norse letters, that has been included in parentheses; for example, Mánagarmr (Managarm).

Álfheimr (Alfheim): A western region of Yggdrasil and home to the Hoof Clan. In mythology, Álfheimr is one of the Nine Worlds and means "Home of the Elves."

álkipfer: Otherwise known as "elven copper," álkipfer is the mysterious and possibly magical material that is used in objects such as the sacred mirror which summoned Yuuto to the world of Yggdrasil. This seems to be a wholly original term, combining the Norse Álf with the German kupfer.

Angrboða (Angrboda): The goddess worshiped in lárarviðr and said to be the guardian deity of the Wolf Clan. In Norse mythology, she is one of a race of "giants" known as the jötnar (singular jötunn) and is the mother of the

monstrous wolf Fenrir.

Ásgarðr (Asgard): The Holy Ásgarðr Empire is, officially speaking, the ruling power over all of Yggdrasil. The central Ásgarðr region contains the imperial capital, and is the only region which is still actually under direct imperial control and governance. In Norse mythology, Ásgarðr is the realm of Odin and the race of gods known as the Æsir (Aesir).

Aurgelmir (Ymir): See entry for Ymir.

Bifröst Basin (Bifrost, Bivrost): The fertile area of land between two of the three mountain ranges of Yggdrasil, it is the home of the Claw and Wolf Clans, and contains some sections of territory belonging to the Horn, Hoof, and Lightning clans as well. It is a major trade route. In Norse mythology, Bifröst is the name of the rainbow bridge connecting the human realm to the realm of the gods.

Bilskírnir (Bilskirnir): The capital city of the Lightning Clan. In Norse mythology, Bilskírnir is the name of the great hall where the god Þórr (Thor) resides in the realm of Ásgarðr.

Blíkjanda-Böl (Blikjandabol): The capital city of the Flame Clan. In Norse mythology, it is the name of the curtains adorning the bed of Hel, queen of the dead. In Old Norse, the name means “gleaming disaster,” or “pale misfortune.”

Dólgþrasir (Dolgthrasir): “The Battle-Hungry Tiger,” alias of the Lightning Clan patriarch Steinþórr. In Norse mythology, Dólgþrasir is a dwarven name which roughly means “snorting with rage at the enemy” or “eager for battle.”

Einherjar: Said to be humans chosen by the gods, they are people who possess a magical rune somewhere on their body which grants enhanced abilities or mystical powers. In Norse mythology, Einherjar are the chosen souls

of brave warriors, taken to Valhalla after death where they feast and fight until the end of days, Ragnarök.

Élivágar River (Elivagar): A tributary river flowing from the Prúðvangr Mountains into the larger Körmt River. The territory along its banks was the site of two major military clashes between Yuuto and the forces of Steinþórr and the Lightning Clan. In Norse mythology, Élivágar (meaning “Ice-Waves”) refers to a number of frozen rivers flowing through the primordial void before the beginning of the world.

Fjörgyn (Fjorgyn): A goddess worshiped in the village of Stórk in Vanaheimr, and presumably in other places in Yggdrasil as well. In Norse Mythology, Fjörgyn is the name of a goddess of the earth, and the mother of the thunder god Þórr (Thor).

Fólkvangr (Folkvang): The capital of the Horn Clan. Like the Wolf Clan capital Iárnviðr, it is located next to the Körmt River. In Norse mythology, Fólkvangr is a plane of the afterlife similar to Valhalla, ruled over by the goddess Freyja.

galdr: A type of magic spell practiced in Yggdrasil, where power is woven into music to create various magical effects. Also spelled galldr (plural galdrar), it is a pagan rite with historical roots reaching back to at least as early as the Iron Age.

garmr: A giant species of wolf native to the Himinbjörg Mountains, and one of the apex predators of the world of Yggdrasil. In Norse mythology, Garmr is the name of a huge hound (sometimes depicted as a wolf) guarding the gates to Hel, one of the realms of the dead.

Gimlé (Gimle, Gimli): The capital of the Steel Clan, a populous riverside city surrounded by fertile land. It was once a Horn Clan city, but Yuuto captured it while he was patriarch of the Wolf Clan. In Norse mythology, Gimlé is a heavenly place where the survivors of Ragnarök are said to dwell. It is described

as a beautiful hall or palace on a mountain.

Glaðsheimr (Gladshheim): The capital of the Holy Empire of Ásgarðr. It is part of the realm of the gods in Norse mythology, said to be where the hall of Valhalla is located.

Helheim: A southern region of Yggdrasil, far to the south of the Lightning Clan territory. In Norse Mythology, Helheim is one of the Nine Realms, a land of the dead deep underground also called Hel. It thus shares the same name as the goddess Hel who rules over that realm.

Himinbjörg Mountains (Himinbjorg): One of the two mountain ranges that border the Bifröst Basin. Known in Norse mythology as the place where the god Heimdallr keeps watch.

hörgr (horgr): In Yggdrasil, a hörgr is a sanctuary hall containing an altar, where religious rites are conducted. Historically, hörgr has been used to refer to an open-air holy site, like a shrine or altar, sometimes even something as simple as a heap of stones.

Járnviðr (Iarnvid, Jarnvid): The capital of the Wolf Clan, located on the eastern side of the Bifröst Basin. It is also often spelled as Járnvíðr and roughly means “Iron-wood.” It appears in Norse mythology as a forest east of Miðgarðr which is home to trolls and giant wolves.

Jötunheimr (Jotunheimr, Jotunheim): A region in eastern Yggdrasil not shown on the regional maps so far. In Norse Mythology, Jötunheimr is one of the Nine Worlds and home to the race of “giants” or Jötunn (plural Jötnar), enemies of the gods in Ásgarðr.

Körmt River (Kormt): One of two great rivers running through the Bifröst Basin and most of the clan territories within it. The other is the Örmr River. In

mythology, they are the names of two rivers the god Thor wades through every day to visit Yggdrasil.

Ljósálfar (Ljosalfar): “The Light Elves,” a rune held by the Einherjar Haugspori of the Horn Clan, which grants superior archery abilities. They are one of several races of elves referred to in Norse legends, and are said to reside in Álfheimr.

Mánagarmr (Managarm): “The Strongest Silver Wolf,” Sigrún’s title, given only to the fiercest, most skilled warrior of the Wolf Clan. In mythology, this is also another name for the wolf Hati, who chases the moon across the night sky. In Old Norse, the name Mánagarmr means, roughly, “moon-hound.”

Miðgarðr (Midgard): A northern region of Yggdrasil beyond the Himinbjörg Mountains, where the Panther Clan originally hails from. It is the realm of humans in Norse mythology, commonly known as Midgard.

Múspell Special Forces Unit (Muspell): Múspell Unit for short. The name given to a force of elite soldiers led by Sigrún. The special forces deploy as armed cavalry under her command in wartime, and also function as an elite palace guard in the Wolf Clan capital. The name is a shortened form of Múspellsheimr (commonly spelled Muspelheim), one of the Nine Worlds in Norse mythology.

Náströnd (Nastrond): A region of the northwest Horn Clan territory, wet marshlands stretching along the route between the cities of Sylgr and Myrkviðr. It was the site of a great battle between the Wolf Clan and Panther Clan in Volume 4. In mythology, it’s a place deep in Helheim where the dark dragon Níðhöggr lives, chewing on corpses. The name means “Shore of Corpses” in Old Norse.

Örmt River (Ormt): See Körmt River.

Ragnarök (Ragnarok): Used in the original Japanese text with the phrase “The End Times,” it is a great disaster foretold in a prophecy which has been passed down in secret since the time of the first divine emperor. In Norse mythology, Ragnarök is a series of fateful events culminating in a great war, and the eventual destruction and rebirth of the world.

Reginarch: This is Yuuto’s new title as lord of the Steel Clan and all of the clans below it. It means “Great Lord” or “Greatest Lord” in the language of Yggdrasil. It is composed of the Old Norse regin, meaning “great, powerful, of the gods,” and the ending -árk, which carries the same meaning of “ruler, sovereign” as in the previous title, patriarch.

seiðr (seidr): “Secret arts,” a subset of runic magic. Seiðr is a type of magic spell much harder and more complicated to perform than a galdr, but capable of more powerful results. Felicia’s Gleipnir is one example. Historically, seiðr was a type of sorcery practiced in Old Norse society during the Late Scandinavian Iron Age, and makes frequent appearances in mythology.

Skilfingr: “The Watcher from on High,” alias of Hárbarth. In Norse Mythology, it’s one of the many names for Odin, and scholarly guesses are that it means either “Trembler” or “The one who sits at the high seat/throne.”

Sköll (Skoll): An insulting nickname given to Yuuto, it means “Devourer of Blessings,” or in other words, “a good-for-nothing who only wastes food and resources.” In Norse mythology, Sköll is one of the two great wolves, children of Fenrir, who chase the sun and moon through the sky. Sköll chases the sun, while Hati chases the moon.

Úlfhéðinn: “The Wolfskin,” Hildegard’s rune. In Old Norse, Úlfhéðinn means “(clad in) the fur pelt of a wolf,” and it is thought to refer to a class of fearless warriors, similar to the term “berserker” (which is now thought to mean “clad in the skin of a bear”).

Vanaheimr (Vanaheim): A region of Yggdrasil south of the Bifröst Basin along the western coast of the continent, beginning south of the Körmt River. In mythology, it is one of the Nine Worlds and is home to a group of gods known as the Vanir.

Vindálfs (Vindalfs): “The Band of Wind Elves,” an organization of trained performers and entertainers established by Yuuto and managed by Kristina. The name Vindálfs is derived from Vindálfr, the name of a Dwarf in Norse mythology, with the meaning “wind-elf.”

Vingólf (Vingolf): Vingólf Garden is a small enclosed garden located in the city of Gimlé. In Norse Mythology, Vingólf is another name given for Gimlé, a beautiful sanctuary hall where the survivors of Ragnarök are said to dwell after the final battle.

Þjóðann (theodann, thiudans): In the world of Yggdrasil, this is the title of the ruler of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, meaning “Divine Emperor/Empress.” Historically, it’s a Norse translation of the Visigothic word þiudans, which roughly means “ruler/king.”

Þrúðvangr Mountains (Thrudvang): One of the three great mountain ranges forming what is known as the “Roof of Yggdrasil,” the Þrúðvangr Mountains form the southern border of the Bifröst Basin, and the eastern border of the Vanaheimr region. In Norse mythology, Þrúðvangr is the name of the area of Ásgarðr in which the god Þórr resides in his great hall, Bilskírnir.

Þrymheimr Mountains (Thrymheim): One of the three great mountain ranges forming the “Roof of Yggdrasil,” the Þrymheimr Mountains lie to the east of the Himinbjörg Mountains. In Norse Mythology, Þrymheimr is a location in Jötunheimr, the realm of the giants, home to a giant named Þjazi (Thiazi) who famously kidnapped the goddess of youth, Iðunn (Idun).

Ymir (Aurgelmir): Aurgelmir or Ymir is the name of one of the gods worshiped in Yggdrasil, the primordial “Giant God” whose body is said to have formed the land itself. In Norse mythology, Ymir is the ancestor of the jötnar (“giants”), and after his death by the hands of the first Æsir gods, his body likewise becomes the foundation of the world.









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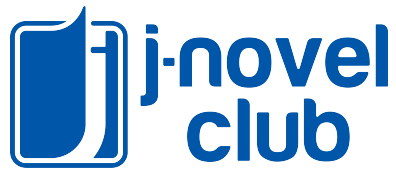
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The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar: Volume 11

by Seiichi Takayama

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